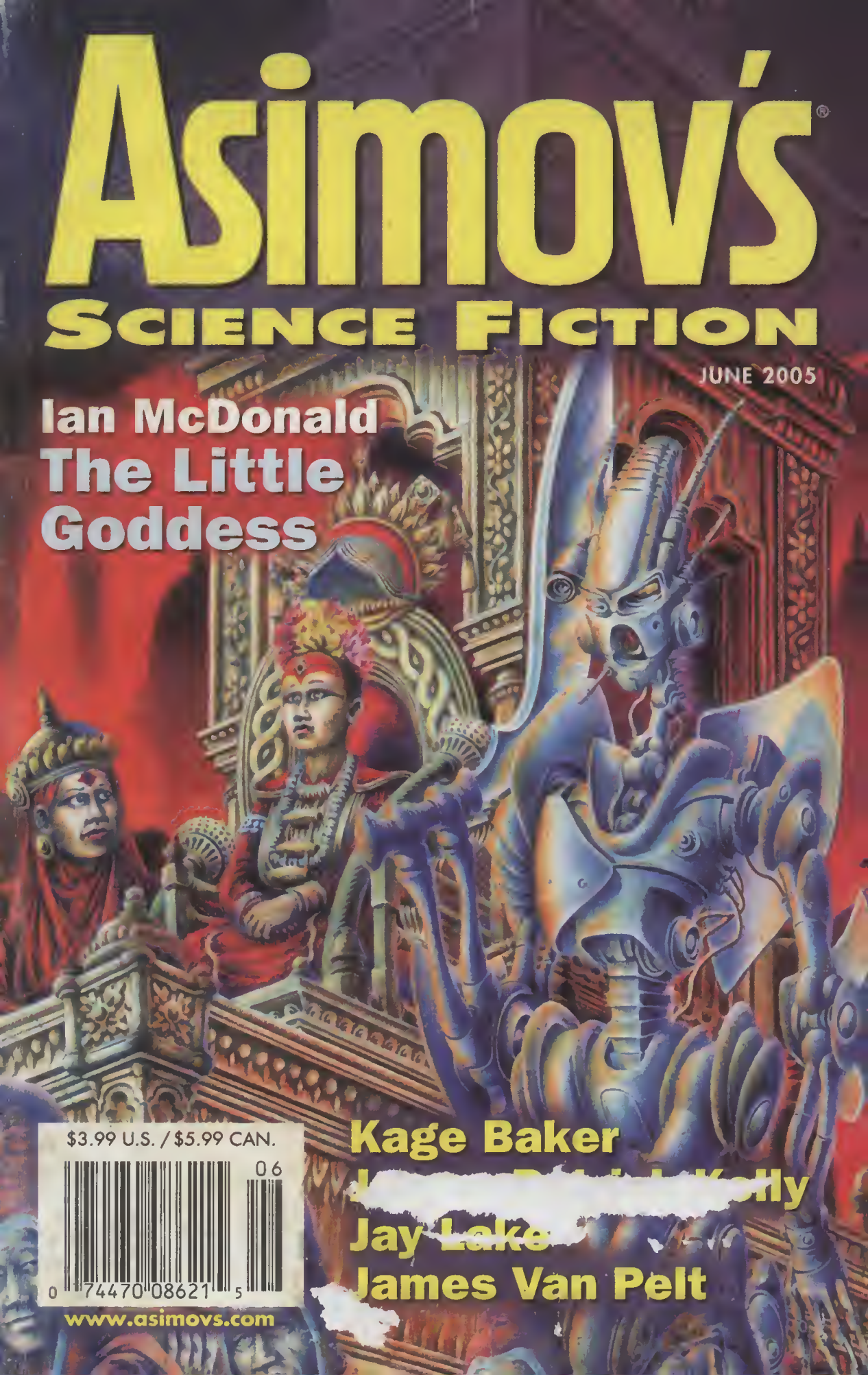
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JUNE 2005

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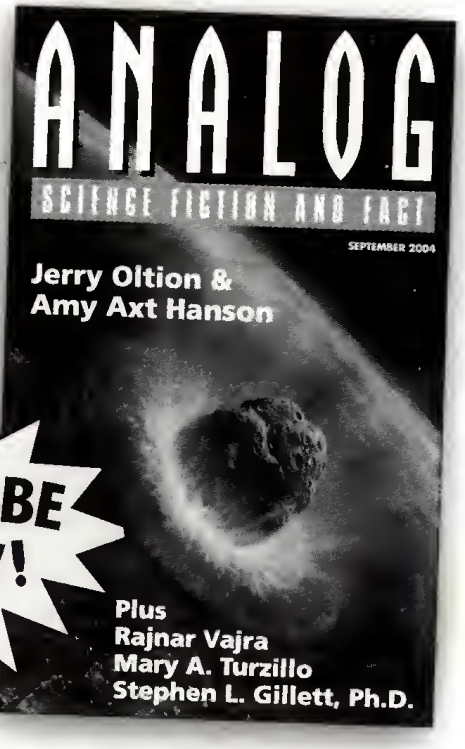
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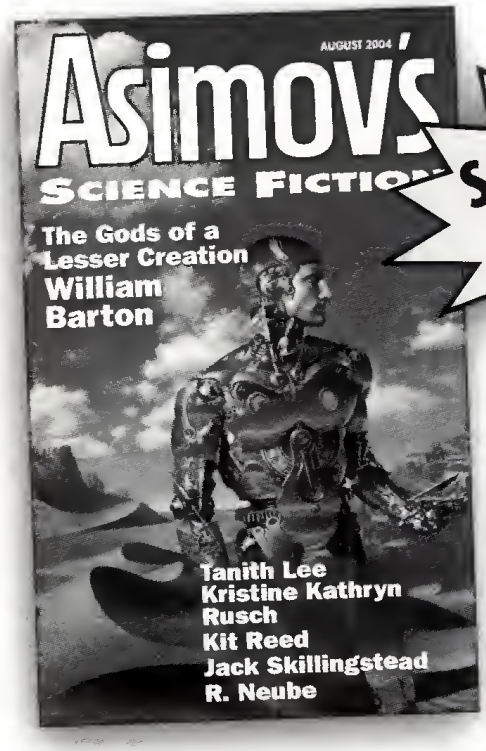
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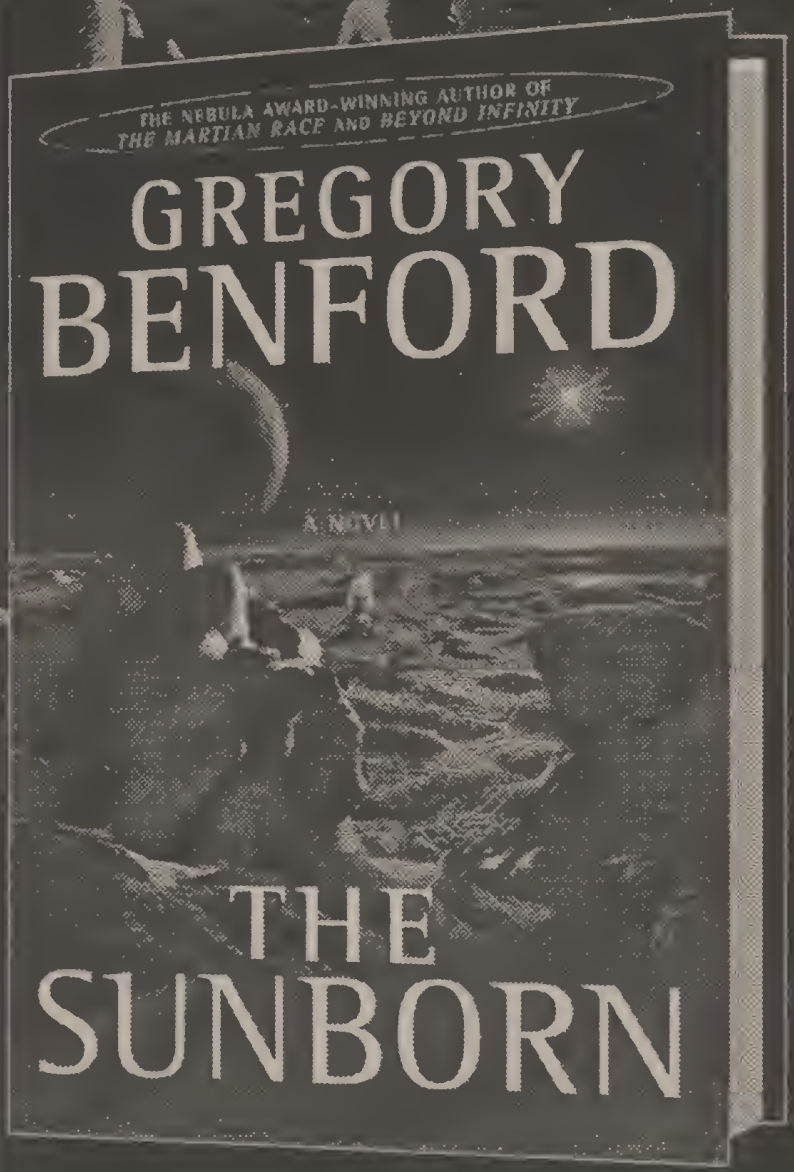
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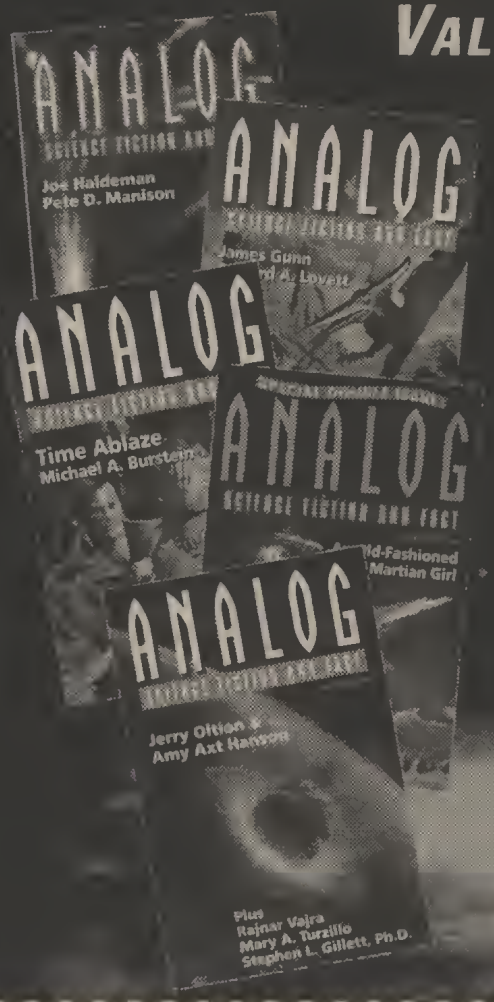
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REFLECTIONS

by Robert Silverberg

MR. ORWELL, MEET MR. DICK AND HERR KAFKA

In a recent column headed "Fantasies About Fiction" I took up some censorship issues having to do with attempts to suppress works of fiction. One case was that of a sicko in a midwestern state who was sent to jail, at least for a short while, for concocting pedophilic fantasies for his own private amusement on his own private computer, and who got detected at it in some Orwellian fashion. The other was that of a young man in a San Francisco college of art who turned in a story for his writing class that was full of nasty gory stuff and who, after a police investigation, was expelled for that, while the teacher of the class lost her job.

I was not surprised to learn, soon after, that the guardians of public order have been busy on other fronts protecting the young, impressionable minds of the nation from the sort of disagreeably violent imagery that is to be found nowadays in fiction, popular music, the movies, and other arenas of entertainment. What I didn't expect was to discover that science fiction—and, specifically, this very magazine—would be fingered as one of the big players in the ongoing corruption of our youth through unsavory acts of the imagination.

What happened is that a thirteen-year-old middle-school girl in Grandville, Michigan, subscribed to *Asimov's* through a magazine service that her school had made available. But when the first issue arrived her mother glanced at it first and was shocked at what she saw. And so it was the girl's good fortune that her mother's vigilance spared her from the emotional and spiritual devastation that reading *Asimov's* can inflict on tender minds.

It is not easy to tell from outside that this magazine is a cesspool of smut. I have some current issues beside me on my desk right now, and I see that their covers portray such things as a winged bug-man, an astronomical scene, another astronomical scene, a spaceship in flight, a bunch of writhing dragons, and the Empire State Building buried to its tip in snow. Even if we concede the phallic nature of the Empire State Building, it is hard to detect pornographic content from these covers. They are innocence itself compared with, say, the stunningly erotic covers by Margaret Brundage that *Weird Tales* published, month after month, in the supposedly prudish 1930s. No, you have to look within to detect the vileness that threatens the purity of our nation's young people. When the girl's mother did, she discovered—as *you* do every month, you slavering fiend— "an adults-only magazine" that was "full of sexual content." It "contained stories about sex, drugs, and molestation." Careful study revealed the portrayal of such things as "young girls with no panties, young girls in white socks, young girls looking at his wank-mags with him, young girls doing it with another while he

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watched." An analysis of the contributor roster showed that the magazine's contents were written by such known pornographers as Ursula K. Le Guin, James Patrick Kelly, Frederik Pohl, Nancy Kress, Jack Williamson, and Connie Willis, and that it had been rewarded for its iniquity by dozens of Hugo and Nebula awards for its fiction and seventeen Hugos for being the year's best magazine of its sort.

Well, we know what sort that is. I myself have been reading science fiction magazines since I was about twelve, and I can testify that untold damage has been done to me over the years by all those descriptions of young girls in white socks. No wonder, then, that the Michigan girl's mother would say, "I was appalled . . . I was very shocked . . . literally shaking when I was reading it." She notified the principal of Grandville Middle School, who immediately launched an investigation, wanting to know why such a magazine had been made available to her school's students and how many of them were in fact reading it right now. Next, the local TV news station got involved: when it discovered that the magazine subscription service that had provided *Asimov's* to the kids was owned by Reader's Digest, it got in touch with the company and was told, "A lot of care goes into choosing the magazine titles we offer. This magazine's contents would no longer meet our standards."

This came, of course, too late to save the youngsters of Grandville, Michigan, from the agony and degradation of reading science fiction. But at least nearby Grand Rapids was spared. The Grand Rapids public-school system had been on the verge of offering *Asimov's* subscriptions also when the Grandville case erupted, and they took a look at the magazine. "Wow, it's very inappropriate," said a Grand Rapids official. "I could see where people would be very upset about this. I'm very glad it's coming to light and we don't have this in the Grand Rapids schools."

Asimov's itself had been contacted, by this time, not only by the girl's mother but by a reporter for the Michigan TV station. A representative of this magazine responded by pointing out that *Asimov's* had never been listed in the school's magazine-subscription catalog under the heading of "Children's Magazines." It was included, rather, in the category of "Science/Technology/Environmental" publications. Furthermore, the school magazine catalog also offered the kids such magazines as *Esquire*, *GQ*, and *Elle*, none of them generally considered to be children's magazines (and, for all I know, just as repugnant to the concerned parents of Grandville, Michigan, as *Asimov's* is.)

The aftermath of the whole uproar is that school authorities in Grandville will carefully monitor its subscription list to make sure that no inappropriate magazines are offered again. (*Asimov's* is no longer on the list, naturally, but its relationship with the subscription service had actually ended a few months before the censorship issue arose, after a dispute over the amount the service would pay the magazine for each subscription.) Since the magazine is no longer available through the schools, young people across the land will now have to obtain it, at a much higher price, through the same underground sources from which they

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currently get their condoms, marijuana, amphetamines, beer, wine, and other recreational commodities.

Another consequence is that *Asimov's* is now running little warning notices ("There are brief scenes in this story that may be disturbing to some") so that those readers who regard themselves as endangered by disturbing material will not be disturbed by it. In the first two issues since the new policy went into effect, two out of fifteen stories were so labeled. At $3.99 an issue, seekers of pornographic thrills thus had to fork out close to eight dollars for a measly two jolts of excitement, all the rest of both issues being, of course, so much wasted paper. A poor bargain indeed.

I do not, of course, question the right of that mother in Michigan to shield her child's eyes from science fiction, or from anything else (halftime shows at football games, rock concerts, political speeches, etc.) that she thinks might be harmful to her. But—although I did admit above that my own life was irrevocably ruined by my discovery of science fiction magazines in early adolescence—I do wonder how much damage, really, an issue of *Asimov's* can do any kid these days. (The world I grew up in, more than half a century ago, was to our era, in the area of general cultural morality, as *Alice in Wonderland* is to the works of the Marquis de Sade.)

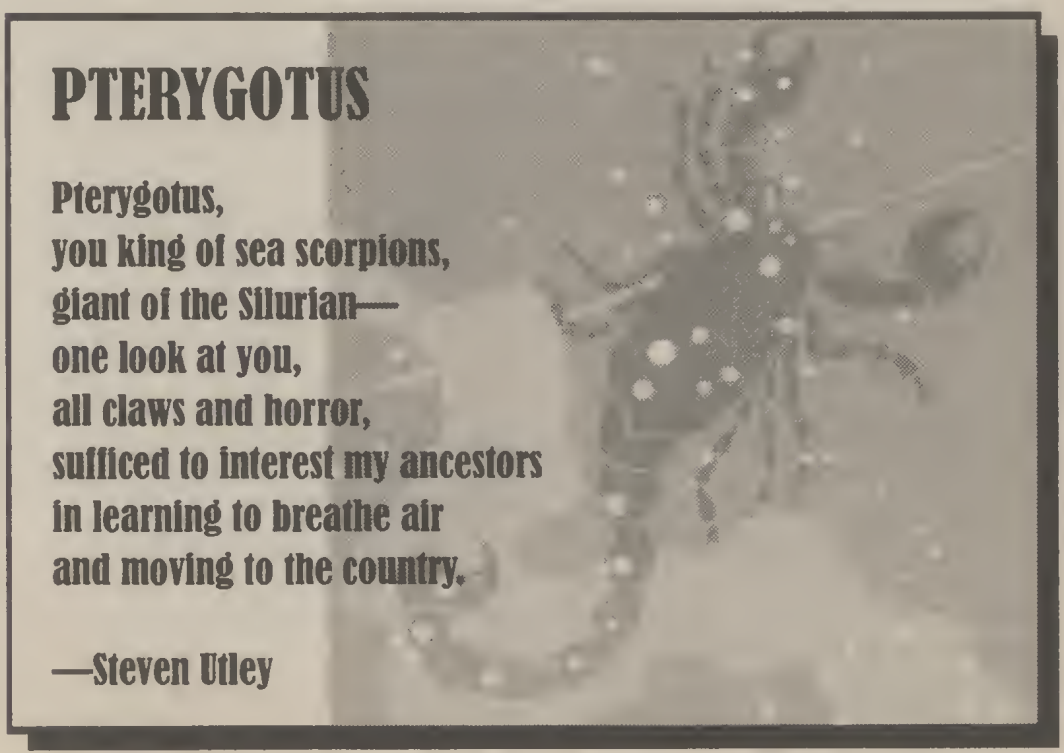
The truth is that there isn't much really offensive material to be found in science fiction magazines—nothing terribly erotic, not much use of formerly unprintable words, no really good torture scenes or enthusiastic advocacy of immoral behavior. The standards of what is printable have loosened considerably, I concede, in the last few decades, but that's true not just in science fiction but in all areas of publishing. (Even the saintly New York *Times*, of "All the News that's Fit to Print" fame, runs some stuff now that would have aroused shock and amazement in the Eisenhower era.)

But we live in funny times, where gaudy displays of eroticism and obscenity are available everywhere, along with an instant decrying of same that carries us from the Orwellian world into the surrealist worlds of Philip K. Dick and Franz Kafka. After decades in which the old censorship laws were gradually hammered to smithereens, new ones have surfaced, especially for the sake of protecting children. The mere possession of pornography involving children is a crime. (See the 1990 Supreme Court ruling in *Osborne vs. Ohio*.) The Child Pornography Prevention Act of 1996 outlawed owning or distributing any photograph that "is, or *appears to be*, of a minor engaging in sexually explicit conduct." The italics there are mine. The original goal of all this legislation was to protect children against the harm that would come from their being used in pornographic contexts. But this law and the companion act passed in 2004 specify that even if no children are harmed at all—if the photos are actually of adults who have been morphed to look like children, or are computer simulations in the first place ("a digital image, or computer-generated image, that is, or is indistinguishable from, that of a minor engaged in sexually explicit conduct") —those who possess such things can go to jail.

I don't like pedophilia any more than you do, and I don't have any

enormous interest in collecting pornography, either. But I do recognize how close we are getting to the prosecution of what George Orwell called "thoughtcrime." If *virtual* pornography is illegal, and writing short stories about ugly violence can get you expelled from college, we verge upon a time when the sort of criticism of society that is one of science fiction's prime achievements might also become illegal. Through parable, analogy, metaphor, and hyperbole, science fiction writers from Jonathan Swift on through George Orwell and Aldous Huxley to any number of moderns have been able to poke holes in society's follies, hypocrisies, and acts of downright totalitarian oppression. But the present atmosphere of excitement over imposing new kinds of censorship on what are, after all, acts of the imagination, troubles me.

I don't really worry much about the Michigan incident. *Asimov's* was simply listed in the wrong category, and ran afoul of one small community's hypersensitivity to the use of themes and words in fiction that much of the nation regards as harmless. And in any case the outcries for more effective censorship of ideas that we are hearing today will die down as the moral pendulum starts swinging back the other way, as it always does. But it makes me uneasy when computer-generated images are made illegal, or when short-story writers get in trouble for writing about nasty things. We talk a lot about freedom in this country: for the moment, at least, the free play of the imagination is imperiled, I think. And I find it an occasion for sadness when science fiction magazines, of all publications in today's general morass of smut and grim creepiness, are kept away from young people for the sake of preserving their youthful angelic purity. ❍



PTERYGOTUS

Pterygotus,
you king of sea scorpions,
giant of the Silurian—
one look at you,
all claws and horror,
sufficed to interest my ancestors
in learning to breathe air
and moving to the country.

—Steven Utley

WHEN THE SINGULARITY IS MORE THAN A LITERARY DEVICE: AN INTERVIEW WITH FUTURIST-INVENTOR RAY KURZWEIL

It's not clear to me whether the Singularity is a technical belief system or a spiritual one.

The Singularity—a notion that's crept into a lot of skiffy, and whose most articulate in-genre spokesmodel is Vernor Vinge—describes the black hole in history that will be created at the moment when human intelligence can be digitized. When the speed and scope of our cognition is hitched to the price-performance curve of microprocessors, our "progress" will double every eighteen months, and then every twelve months, and then every ten, and eventually, every five seconds.

Singularities are, literally, holes in space from whence no information can emerge, and so SF writers occasionally mutter about how hard it is to tell a story set after the information Singularity. Everything will be different. What it means to be human will be so different that what it means to be in danger, or happy, or sad, or any of the other elements that make up the squeeze-and-release tension in a good yarn will be unrecognizable to us pre-Singletons.

It's a neat conceit to write around. I've committed Singularity a couple of times, usually in collaboration with gonzo Singleton Charlie Stross, the mad antipope of the Singularity. But those stories have the same relation to futurism as romance novels do to love: a shared jumping-off point, but radically different morphologies.

Of course, the Singularity isn't just a conceit for noodling with in the pages of the pulps: it's the subject of serious-minded punditry, futurism, and even science.

Ray Kurzweil is one such pundit-futurist-scientist. He's a serial entrepreneur who founded successful businesses that advanced the fields of optical character recognition (machine-reading) software, text-to-speech synthesis, synthetic musical instrument simulation, computer-based speech recognition, and stock-market analysis. He cured his own Type-II diabetes through a careful review of the literature and the judicious application of first principles and reason. To a casual observer, Kurzweil appears to be the star of some kind of Heinlein novel, stealing fire from the gods and embarking on a quest to bring his maverick ideas to the public despite the dismissals of the establishment, getting rich in the process.

Kurzweil believes in the Singularity. In his 1990 manifesto, "The Age of Intelligent Machines," Kurzweil persuasively argued that we were on the brink of meaningful machine intelligence. A decade later, he contin-

ued the argument in a book called *The Age of Spiritual Machines,* whose most audacious claim is that the world's computational capacity has been slowly doubling since the crust first cooled (and before!), and that the doubling interval has been growing shorter and shorter with each passing year, so that now we see it reflected in the computer industry's Mōore's Law, which predicts that microprocessors will get twice as powerful for half the cost about every eighteen months. The breathtaking sweep of this trend has an obvious conclusion: computers more powerful than people; more powerful than we can comprehend.

Now Kurzweil has published two more books, *The Singularity Is Near, When Humans Transcend Biology* (Viking, Spring 2005) and *Fantastic Voyage: Live Long Enough to Live Forever* (with Terry Grossman, Rodale, November 2004). The former is a technological roadmap for creating the conditions necessary for ascent into Singularity; the latter is a book about life-prolonging technologies that will assist baby-boomers in living long enough to see the day when technological immortality is achieved.

See what I meant about his being a Heinlein hero?

I still don't know if the Singularity is a spiritual or a technological belief system. It has all the trappings of spirituality, to be sure. If you are pure and kosher, if you live right and if your society is just, then you will live to see a moment of Rapture when your flesh will slough away leaving nothing behind but your ka, your soul, your consciousness, to ascend to an immortal and pure state.

I wrote a novel called *Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom* where characters could make backups of themselves and recover from them if something bad happened, like catching a cold or being assassinated. It raises a lot of existential questions: most prominently: are you still you when you've been restored from backup?

The traditional AI answer is the Turing Test, invented by Alan Turing, the gay pioneer of cryptography and artificial intelligence who was forced by the British government to take hormone treatments to "cure" him of his homosexuality, culminating in his suicide in 1954. Turing cut through the existentialism about measuring whether a machine is intelligent by proposing a parlor game: a computer sits behind a locked door with a chat program, and a person sits behind another locked door with his own chat program, and they both try to convince a judge that they are real people. If the computer fools a human judge into thinking that it's a person, then to all intents and purposes, it's a person.

So how do you know if the backed-up you that you've restored into a new body—or a jar with a speaker attached to it—is really you? Well, you can ask it some questions, and if it answers the same way that you do, you're talking to a faithful copy of yourself.

Sounds good. But the me who sent his first story into *Asimov's* seventeen years ago couldn't answer the question, "Write a story for *Asimov's*" the same way the me of today could. Does that mean I'm not me anymore?

Kurzweil has the answer.

"If you follow that logic, then if you were to take me ten years ago, I could not pass for myself in a Ray Kurzweil Turing Test. But once the requisite uploading technology be-

comes available a few decades hence, you *could* make a perfect-enough copy of me, and it *would* pass the Ray Kurzweil Turing Test. The copy doesn't have to match the quantum state of my every neuron, either: if you meet me the next day, I'd pass the Ray Kurzweil Turing Test. Nevertheless, none of the quantum states in my brain would be the same. There are quite a few changes that each of us undergo from day to day, we don't examine the assumption that we are the same person closely.

"We gradually change our pattern of atoms and neurons but we very rapidly change the particles the pattern is made up of. We used to think that in the brain—the physical part of us most closely associated with our identity—cells change very slowly, but it turns out that the components of the neurons, the tubules and so forth, turn over in only *days*. I'm a completely different set of particles from what I was a week ago.

"Consciousness is a difficult subject, and I'm always surprised by how many people talk about consciousness routinely as if it could be easily and readily tested scientifically. But we can't postulate a consciousness detector that does not have some assumptions about consciousness built into it.

"Science is about objective third party observations and logical deductions from them. Consciousness is about first-person, subjective experience, and there's a fundamental gap there. We live in a world of assumptions about consciousness. We share the assumption that other human beings are conscious, for example. But that breaks down when we go outside of humans, when we consider, for example, animals. Some say only humans are conscious and animals are instinctive and machinelike. Others see humanlike behavior in an animal and consider the animal conscious, but even these observers don't generally attribute consciousness to animals that aren't humanlike.

"When machines are complex enough to have responses recognizable as emotions, those machines will be more humanlike than animals."

The Kurzweil Singularity goes like this: computers get better and smaller. Our ability to measure the world gains precision and grows ever cheaper. Eventually, we can measure the world inside the brain and make a copy of it in a computer that's as fast and complex as a brain, and voila, intelligence.

Here in the twenty-first century we like to view ourselves as ambulatory brains, plugged into meat-puppets that lug our precious grey matter from place to place. We tend to think of that grey matter as transcendently complex, and we think of it as being the bit that makes us *us*.

But brains aren't that complex, Kurzweil says. Already, we're starting to unravel their mysteries.

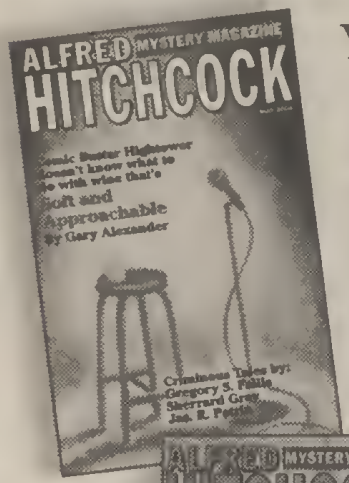
"We seem to have found one area of the brain closely associated with higher-level emotions, the spindle cells, deeply embedded in the brain. There are tens of thousands of them, spanning the whole brain (maybe eighty thousand in total), which is an incredibly small number. Babies don't have any, most animals don't have any, and they likely only evolved over the last million years or so. Some of the high-level emotions that are deeply human come from these.

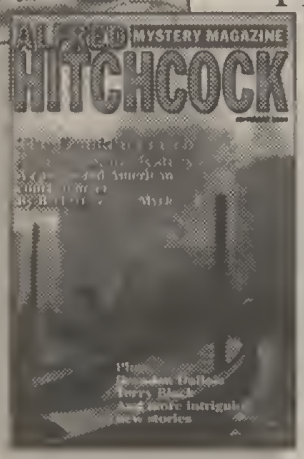
"Turing had the right insight: base the test for intelligence on written language. Turing Tests really work. A novel is based on language: with

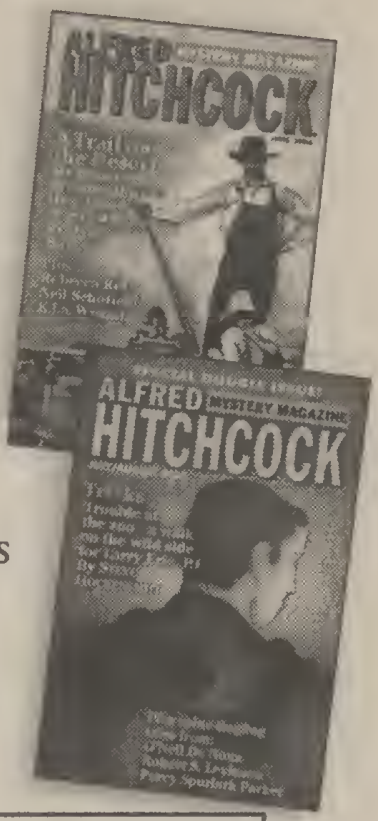
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language you can conjure up any reality, much more so than with images. Turing almost lived to see computers doing a good job of performing in fields like math, medical diagnosis and so on, but those tasks were easier for a machine than demonstrating even a child's mastery of language. Language is the true embodiment of human intelligence."

If we're not so complex, then it's only a matter of time until computers are more complex than us. When that comes, our brains will be modelable in a computer and that's when the fun begins. That's the thesis of *Spiritual Machines,* which even includes a (Heinlein-style) timeline leading up to this day.

Now, it may be that a human brain contains *n* logic-gates and runs at *x* cycles per second and stores *z* petabytes, and that n and x and z are all within reach. It may be that we can take a brain apart and record the position and relationships of all the neurons and sub-neuronal elements that constitute a brain.

But there are also a nearly infinite number of ways of modeling a brain in a computer, and only a finite (or possibly nonexistent) fraction of that space will yield a conscious copy of the original meat-brain. Science fiction writers usually hand-wave this step: in Heinlein's "Man Who Sold the Moon," the gimmick is that once the computer becomes complex enough, with enough "random numbers," it just wakes up.

Computer programmers are a little more skeptical. Computers have never been known for their skill at programming themselves—they tend to be no smarter than the people who write their software.

But there are techniques for getting computers to program themselves, based on evolution and natural selection. A programmer creates a system that spits out lots—thousands or even millions—of randomly generated programs. Each one is given the opportunity to perform a computational task (say, sorting a list of numbers from greatest to least) and the ones that solve the problem best are kept aside while the others are erased. Now the survivors are used as the basis for a new generation of randomly mutated descendants, each based on elements of the code that preceded them. By running many instances of a randomly varied program at once, and by culling the least successful and regenerating the population from the winners very quickly, it is possible to *evolve* effective software that performs as well or better than the code written by human authors.

Indeed, evolutionary computing is a promising and exciting field that's realizing real returns through cool offshoots like "ant colony optimization" and similar approaches that are showing good results in fields as diverse as piloting military UAVs and efficiently provisioning car-painting robots at automotive plants.

So if you buy Kurzweil's premise that computation is getting cheaper and more plentiful than ever, then why not just use evolutionary algorithms to *evolve* the best way to model a scanned-in human brain such that it "wakes up" like Heinlein's Mike computer?

Indeed, this is the crux of Kurzweil's argument in *Spiritual Machines:* if we have computation to spare and a detailed model of a human brain, we need only combine them and out will pop the mechanism whereby we may upload our consciousness to digital storage me-

dia and transcend our weak and bothersome meat forever.

But it's a cheat. Evolutionary algorithms depend on the same mechanisms as real-world evolution: heritable variation of candidates and a system that culls the least-suitable candidates. This latter—the fitness-factor that determines which individuals in a cohort breed and which vanish—is the key to a successful evolutionary system. Without it, there's no pressure for the system to achieve the desired goal: merely mutation and more mutation.

But how can a machine evaluate which of a trillion models of a human brain is "most like" a conscious mind? Or better still: which one is most like the individual whose brain is being modeled?

"It is a sleight of hand in *Spiritual Machines*," Kurzweil admits. "But in *The Singularity Is Near*, I have an in-depth discussion about what we know about the brain and how to model it. Our tools for understanding the brain are subject to the Law of Accelerating Returns, and we've made more progress in reverse-engineering the human brain than most people realize." This is a tasty Kurzweilism that observes that improvements in technology yield tools for improving technology, round and round, so that the thing that progress begets more than anything is more and yet faster progress.

"Scanning resolution of human tissue—both spatial and temporal—is doubling every year, and so is our knowledge of the workings of the brain. The brain is not one big neural net, the brain is several hundred different regions, and we can understand each region, we can model the regions with mathematics, most of which have some nexus with chaos and self-organizing systems. This has already been done for a couple dozen regions out of the several hundred.

"We have a good model of a dozen or so regions of the auditory and visual cortex, how we strip images down to very low-resolution movies based on pattern recognition. Interestingly, we don't actually see things, we essentially hallucinate them in detail from what we see from these low resolution cues. Past the early phases of the visual cortex, detail doesn't reach the brain.

"We are getting *exponentially* more knowledge. We can get detailed scans of neurons working *in vivo,* and are beginning to understand the chaotic algorithms underlying human intelligence. In some cases, we are getting comparable performance of brain regions in simulation. These tools will continue to grow in detail and sophistication.

"We can have confidence of reverse-engineering the brain in twenty years or so. The reason that brain reverse engineering has not contributed much to artificial intelligence is that up until recently we didn't have the right tools. If I gave you a computer and a few magnetic sensors and asked you to reverse-engineer it, you might figure out that there's a magnetic device spinning when a file is saved, but you'd never get at the instruction set. Once you reverse-engineer the computer fully, however, you can express its principles of operation in just a few dozen pages.

"Now there are new tools that let us see the interneuronal connections and their signaling, *in vivo,* and in real-time. We're just now getting these tools and there's very rapid application of the tools to obtain the data.

"Twenty years from now we will have realistic simulations and mod-

els of all the regions of the brain and [we will] understand how they work. We won't blindly or mindlessly copy those methods, we will understand them and use them to improve our AI toolkit. So we'll learn how the brain works and then apply the sophisticated tools that we will obtain, as we discover how the brain works.

"Once we understand a subtle science principle, we can isolate, amplify, and expand it. Air goes faster over a curved surface: from that insight we isolated, amplified, and expanded the idea and invented air travel. We'll do the same with intelligence.

"Progress is exponential—not just a measure of power of computation, number of Internet nodes, and magnetic spots on a hard disk—the rate of paradigm shift is itself accelerating, doubling every decade. Scientists look at a problem and they intuitively conclude that since we've solved 1 percent over the last year, it'll therefore be one hundred years until the problem is exhausted: but the rate of progress doubles every decade, and the power of the information tools (in price-performance, resolution, bandwidth, and so on) doubles every year. People, even scientists, don't grasp exponential growth. During the first decade of the human genome project, we only solved 2 percent of the problem, but we solved the remaining 98 percent in five years."

But Kurzweil doesn't think that the future will arrive in a rush. As William Gibson observed, "The future is here, it's just not evenly distributed."

"Sure, it'd be interesting to take a human brain, scan it, reinstantiate the brain, and run it on another substrate. That will ultimately happen."

"But the most salient scenario is that we'll *gradually* merge with our technology. We'll use nanobots to kill pathogens, then to kill cancer cells, and then they'll go into our brain and do benign things there like augment our memory, and very gradually they'll get more and more sophisticated. There's no single great leap, but there is ultimately a great leap comprised of many small steps.

"In *The Singularity Is Near*, I describe the radically different world of 2040, and how we'll get there one benign change at a time. The Singularity will be gradual, smooth.

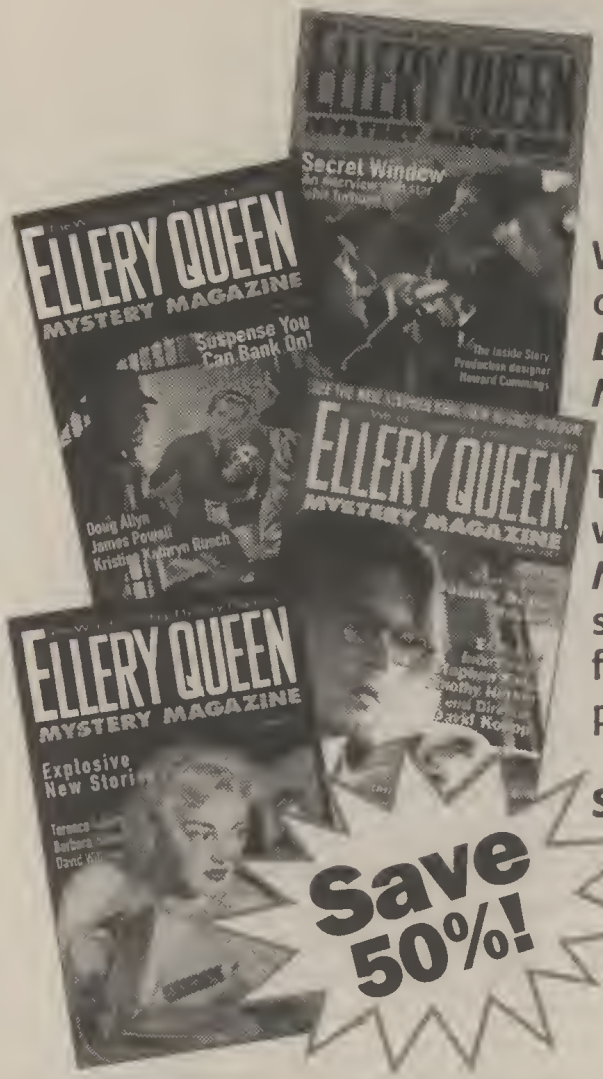
"Really, this is about augmenting our biological thinking with nonbiological thinking. We have a capacity of 10^{26} to 10^{29} calculations per second (cps) in the approximately 10^{10} biological human brains on Earth and that number won't change much in fifty years, but nonbiological thinking will just crash through that. By 2049, nonbiological thinking capacity will be on the order of a billion times that. We'll get to the point where bio thinking is relatively insignificant.

"People didn't throw their typewriters away when word-processing started. There's always an overlap—it'll take time before we realize how much more powerful nonbiological thinking will ultimately be."

It's well and good to talk about all the stuff we *can* do with technology, but it's a lot more important to talk about the stuff we'll be *allowed* to do with technology. Think of the global freak-out caused by the relatively trivial advent of peer-to-peer filesharing tools: Universities are wiretapping their campuses and disciplining computer science students for writing legitimate, general purpose software; grandmothers and twelve-year-olds are losing their life

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savings; privacy and due process have sailed out the window without so much as a by-your-leave.

Even P2P's worst enemies admit that this is a general-purpose technology with good *and* bad uses, but when new tech comes along it often engenders a response that countenances punishing an infinite number of innocent people to get at the guilty.

What's going to happen when the new technology paradigm isn't song-swapping, but transcendent superintelligence? Will the reactionary forces be justified in razing the whole ecosystem to eliminate a few parasites who are doing negative things with the new tools?

"Complex ecosystems will always have parasites. Malware [malicious software] is the most important battlefield today.

"*Everything* will become software—objects will be malleable, we'll spend lots of time in VR, and computhought will be orders of magnitude more important than biothought.

"Software is already complex enough that we have an ecological terrain that has emerged just as it did in the bioworld.

"That's partly because technology is unregulated and people have access to the tools to create malware and the medicine to treat it. Today's software viruses are clever and stealthy and not simpleminded. *Very* clever.

"But here's the thing: you don't see people advocating shutting down the Internet because malware is so destructive. I mean, malware is potentially more than a nuisance—emergency systems, air traffic control, and nuclear reactors all run on vulnerable software. It's an important issue, but the potential damage is still a tiny fraction of the benefit we get from the Internet.

"I hope it'll remain that way—that the Internet won't become a regulated space like medicine. Malware's not the most important issue facing human society today. Designer bioviruses are. People are concerted about WMDs, but the most daunting WMD would be a designed biological virus. The means exist in college labs to create destructive viruses that erupt and spread silently with long incubation periods.

"Importantly, a would-be bio-terrorist doesn't have to put malware through the FDA's regulatory approval process, but scientists working to fix bio-malware *do*.

"In Huxley's *Brave New World*, the rationale for the totalitarian system was that technology was too dangerous and needed to be controlled. But that just pushes technology underground where it becomes *less* stable. Regulation gives the edge of power to the irresponsible who won't listen to the regulators anyway.

"The way to put more stones on the defense side of the scale is to put more resources into defensive technologies, not create a totalitarian regime of Draconian control.

"I advocate a one hundred billion dollar program to accelerate the development of anti-biological virus technology. The way to combat this is to develop broad tools to destroy viruses. We have tools like RNA interference, just discovered in the past two years to block gene expression. We could develop means to sequence the genes of a new virus (SARS only took thirty-one days) and respond to it in a matter of days.

"Think about it. There's no FDA for software, no certification for programmers. The government is thinking about it, though! The reason the

FCC is contemplating Trusted Computing mandates,"—a system to restrict what a computer can do by means of hardware locks embedded on the motherboard—"is that computing technology is broadening to cover everything. So now you have communications bureaucrats, biology bureaucrats, all wanting to regulate computers.

"Biology would be a lot more stable if we moved away from regulation—which is extremely irrational and onerous and doesn't appropriately balance risks. Many medications are not available today even though they should be. The FDA always wants to know what happens if we approve this and will it turn into a thalidomide situation that embarrasses us on CNN?

"Nobody asks about the harm that will certainly accrue from delaying a treatment for one or more years. There's no political weight at all, people have been dying from diseases like heart disease and cancer for as long as we've been alive. Attributable risks get 100-1000 times more weight than unattributable risks."

Is this spirituality or science? Perhaps it is the melding of both—more shades of Heinlein, this time the weird religions founded by people who took *Stranger in a Strange Land way* too seriously.

After all, this is a system of belief that dictates a means by which we can care for our bodies virtuously and live long enough to transcend them. It is a system of belief that concerns itself with the meddling of non-believers, who work to undermine its goals through irrational systems predicated on their disbelief. It is a system of belief that asks and answers the question of what it means to be human.

It's no wonder that the Singularity has come to occupy so much of the science fiction narrative in these years. Science or spirituality, you could hardly ask for a subject better tailored to technological speculation and drama. ❍

Cory Doctorow <craphound.com> *is the Campbell-Award-winning author of* Down and Out in the Magic Kingdom *(Tor 2003). His most recent novel is* Someone Comes to Town, Someone Leaves Town *(Tor, May 2005). He is the co-editor of the popular weblog* ***Boing Boing*** <boingboing.net>*, a contributing editor for* Popular Science*, a contributing writer for* Wired Magazine*, and he's writing a column for O'Reilly's new* Make *magazine. Cory lives in London and works on international copyright and technology issues for the Electronic Frontier Foundation* <eff.org>.

THE EDGE OF NOWHERE

James Patrick Kelly

James Patrick Kelly tells us, "I wrote 'The Edge of Nowhere' for Walter Jon Williams's Rio Hondo workshop in May of last year. Actually, I wrote a substantial portion of it *at* the workshop due to my predilection for procrastination. Thanks to all for the advice and support." The author has a short novel called *Burn* coming out from Tachyon Press in the fall.

Lorraine Carraway scowled at the dogs through the plate glass window of the Casa de la Laughing Cookie and Very Memorial Library. The dogs squatted in a row next to the book drop, acting as if they owned the sidewalk. There were three of them, grand in their bowler hats and paisley vests and bow ties. They were like no dogs Rain had ever seen before. One of them wore a gold watch on its collar, which was pure affectation since it couldn't possibly see the dial. Bad dogs, she was certain of that, recreated out of rust and dead tires and old Coke bottles by the cognisphere and then dispatched to Nowhere to spy on the real people and cause at least three different kinds of trouble.

Will turned a page in his loose-leaf binder. "They still out there?" He glanced up at her, his No. 2 pencil poised over a blank page.

"What the hell do they think they're doing?" Rain made brushing motions just under the windowsill. "Go away. Scram!"

"Scram?" said Will. "Is scram a word?"

Will had been writing *The Great American Novel* ever since he had stopped trying to prove Fermat's Last Theorem. Before that he had been in training to run a sub four-minute mile. She'd had to explain to him that the mile was a measure of distance, like the cubit or the fathom or the meter. Rain had several books about ancient measurement in the Very Memorial Library and Will had borrowed them to lay out a course to practice on. They'd known each other since the week after Will had

been revived, but they had first had sex during his running phase. It turned out that runners made wonderfully energetic lovers—especially nineteen-year-old runners. She had been there to time his personal best at 4:21:15. But now he was up to Chapter Eleven of *The Great American Novel.* He had taken on the project after Rain assured him that the great American novel had yet to be written. These days, not many people were going for it.

"Where do dogs like that come from, anyway?" Will said.

"Don't be asking her about dogs," called Fast Eddie from his cookie lab. "Rain hates all dogs, don't you know?"

Rain was going to deny this, but the Casa de la Laughing Cookie was Fast Eddie's shop. Since he let her keep her books in the broken meat locker and call it a library, she tried not to give him any headaches. Of course, Rain didn't *hate* dogs, it was just that she had no use for their smell, their turds hidden in lawns, or the way they tried to lick her face with their slimy tongues. Of course, this bunch wasn't the same as the dim-witted dogs people kept around town. They were obviously creatures of the cognisphere; she expected that they would be better behaved.

Will came up beside her. "I'm thinking the liver-colored one with the ears is a bloodhound." He nodded at the big dog with the watch on its collar. "The others look like terriers of some sort. They've got a pointer's skull and the short powerful legs. Feisty dogs, killers actually. Fox hunters used to carry terriers in their saddlebags and when their hounds cornered the poor fox, they'd release the terriers to finish him off."

"How do you know that?" said Rain, suddenly afraid that there would be dogs in *The Great American Novel.*

"Read it somewhere." He considered. "Jane Austen? Evelyn Waugh?"

At that moment, the bloodhound raised his snout. Rain got the impression that he was sniffing the air. He stared through the front window at . . . who? Rain? Will? Some signal passed between the dogs then, because they all stood. One of the terriers reared up on its hind legs and batted the door handle. Rain ducked from Will's side and retreated to the safety of her desk.

"I'm betting they're not here to buy happy crumbs." Will scratched behind his ear with the rubber eraser on his pencil.

The terrier released the latch on the second try and the door swung open. The shop bell tinkled as the dogs entered. Fast Eddie slid out of the lab, wiping his hands on his apron. He stood behind the display case that held several dozen lead crystal trays filled with artfully broken psychotropic cookies. Rain hoped that he'd come to lend her moral support and not just to see if the dogs wanted his baked goods. The terriers deployed themselves just inside the door, as if to prevent anyone from leaving. Will stooped to shake the paw of the dog nearest him.

"Are you an Airedale or a Welsh?" he said.

"Never mind that now," said the dog.

The bloodhound padded up to Rain, who was glad to have the desk between them. She got a distinct whiff of damp fur and dried spit as he approached. She wrinkled her nose and wondered what she smelled like to him.

The bloodhound heaved his bulk onto his hind legs. He took two shaky steps toward her and then his forepaws were scrabbling against the top of her desk. The dark pads unfolded into thick, clawed fingers; instead of a dewclaw, the thing had a thumb. "I'm looking for a book," said the dog. His bowler hat tipped precariously. "My name is Baskerville."

Rain frowned at the scratches the dog's claws made on her desktop. "Well, you've got *that* wrong." She leaned back in her chair to get away from its breath. "Baskerville wasn't the hound's name. Sir Charles Baskerville was Sherlock Holmes's *client*."

"You may recall that Sir Charles was frightened to death by the hound well before Dr. Mortimer called on Holmes," Baskerville said. He had a voice like a kettle drum. "The client was actually his nephew, Sir Henry."

Rain chewed at her lower lip. "Dogs don't wear hats." She didn't care to be contradicted by some clumsy artifact of the cognisphere. "Or ties. Are you even real?"

"Rather a rude question, don't you think?" Baskerville regarded her with sorrowful melted-chocolate eyes. "Are *you* real?"

The dog was right; this was the one thing the residents of Nowhere never asked. "I don't have your damn book." Rain opened the top drawer of the desk, the one where she threw all her loose junk. It was a way to keep the dog from seeing her embarrassment.

"How do you know?" he said reasonably. "I haven't told you what it is."

She sorted through the contents of the drawer as if searching for something. She moved the dental floss, destiny dice, blank catalog cards, a tape measure, her father's medals, the two dead watches and finally picked out a bottle of ink and the Waterman 1897 Eyedropper fountain pen that Will had given her to make up for the fight they'd had about the laundry. The dog waited politely. "Well?" She unscrewed the lid of the ink bottle.

"It's called *The Last President*," said Baskerville, "I'm afraid I don't know the author."

Rain felt the blood drain from her face. *The Last President* had been Will's working title for his book, just before he had started calling it *The Great American Novel*. She dipped the nib of the fountain pen into the ink bottle, pulled the filling lever and then wiped the nib on a tissue. "Never heard of it," she said as she wrote *Last Prez??* in her daybook. She glanced over at Will, and caught him squirming on his chair. He looked as if his pockets were full of crickets. "Fiction or non-fiction?"

"Fiction."

She wrote that down. "Short stories or a novel?"

"I'm not sure. A novel, I think."

The shop bell tinkled as Mrs. Snopes cracked the door opened. She hesitated when she bumped one of the terriers. "Is something wrong?" she said, not taking her hand from the handle.

"Right as nails," said Fast Eddie. "Come in, Helen, good to see you. These folks are here for Rain. The big one is Mr. Baskerville and—I'm sorry, I didn't catch your names." He gave the terriers a welcoming smile. Fast Eddie had become the friendliest man in Nowhere ever since his wife had stepped off the edge of town and disappeared.

"Spot," said one.

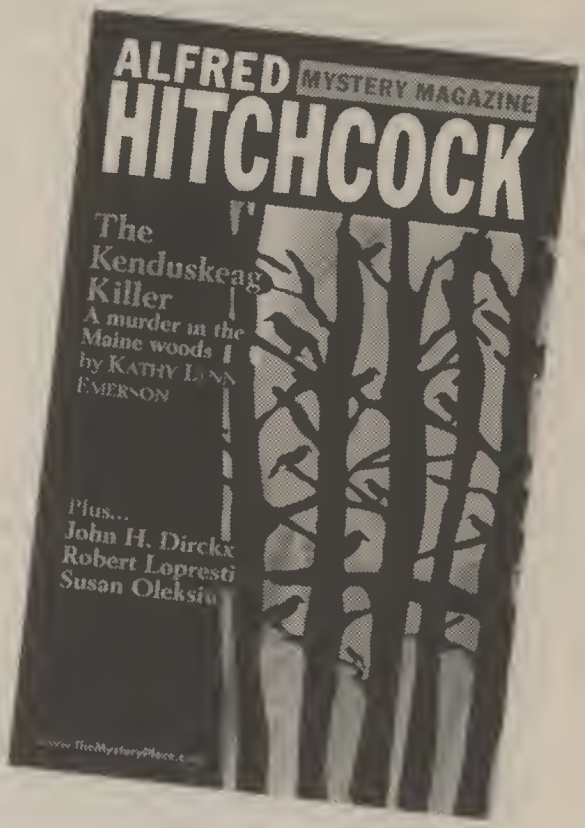
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"Rover," said the other.

"Folks?" muttered Mrs. Snopes. "Dogs is what I call 'em." She inhaled, twisted her torso and squeezed between the two terriers. Mrs. Snopes was very limber; she taught swing yoga at the Town Hall Monday, Tuesday, and Thursday nights from 6-7:30. "I've got a taste for some crumbs of your banana oatmeal bar," she said. "That last one laid me out for the better part of an afternoon. How are they breaking today, Eddie?"

"Let's just see." He set a tray on the top of the display case and pulled on a glove to sort through the broken cookies.

"You are Lorraine Carraway?" said Baskerville.

"That's her name, you bet." Will broke in impulsively. "But she hates it." He crumpled the loose-leaf page he had been writing on, tossed it at the trashcan and missed. "Call her Rain."

Rain bristled. She didn't hate her name; she just didn't believe in it.

"And you are?" said the bloodhound. His lips curled away from pointed teeth and black gums in a grotesque parody of a smile.

"Willy Werther, but everyone calls me Will."

"I see you are supplied with pencil and paper, young Will. Are you a writer?"

"Me? Oh, no. No." He feigned a yawn. "Well, sort of." For a moment, Rain was certain that he was going to blurt out that *he* was the author of *The Last President*. She wasn't sure why she thought that would be a bad idea, but she did. "I . . . uh . . ." Now that Will had Baskerville's attention, he didn't seem to know what to do with it. "I've been trying to remember jokes for Eddie to tell at church," he said. "Want to hear one?" Fast Eddie and Mrs. Snopes glanced up from their cookie deliberations. "Okay then, how do you keep your dog from digging in the garden?"

"I don't know, Will." Rain just wanted him to shut up. "How?"

"Take away his shovel." Will looked from Baskerville to Rain and then to Fast Eddie. "No?"

"No." Eddie, who had just become a deacon in the Temple of the Eternal Smile, shook his head. "God likes Her jokes to be funny."

"Funny." Will nodded. "Got it. So what's this book about anyway, Mr. B?"

"Will, I just don't know," said the bloodhound. "That's why I'd like to read it." Baskerville turned and yipped over his shoulder. Rover trotted to him and the bloodhound dropped onto all fours. Rain couldn't see what passed between them because the desk blocked her view, but when Baskerville heaved himself upright again he was holding a brass dog whistle in his paw. He dropped it, clattering, on the desktop in front of Rain.

"When you find the book, Rain," said Baskerville, "give us a call."

Rain didn't like it that Baskerville just assumed that she would take on the search. "Wait a minute," she said. "Why do you need me to look for it? You're part of the cognisphere, right? You already *know* everything."

"We have access to everything," said Baskerville. "Retrieval is another matter." He growled at Spot. The shop bell tinkled as he opened the door. "I look forward to hearing from you, Rain. Will, it was a pleasure to meet you." The bloodhound nodded at Fast Eddie and Mrs. Snopes, but they paid him no attention. Their heads were bent over the tray of crumbs.

Baskerville left the shop, claws clicking against the gray linoleum. The terriers followed him out.

"Nice dogs." Will affected an unconcerned saunter as he crossed the room, although he flew the last few steps. "My book, Rain!" he whispered, his voice thick. With what? Fear? Pride?

"Is it?" Rain had yet to read a word of *The Great American Novel*; Will claimed it was too rough to show. Although she could imagine that this might be true, she couldn't help but resent being shut out. She offered him the whistle. "So call them."

"What are you saying?" He shrank back, as if mere proximity to the whistle might shrivel his soul. "They're from . . ." He pointed through the window toward the precipitous edge of the mesa on which Nowhere perched. ". . . out there."

Nobody knew where the cognisphere was located exactly, or even if it occupied physical space at all. "All right then, don't." Rain shrugged and pocketed the whistle.

Will seemed disappointed in her. He obviously had three hundred things he wanted to say—and she was supposed to listen. He had always been an excitable boy, although Rain hadn't seen him this wound up since the first time they had made love. But this was neither the time nor the place for feverish speculation. She put a finger to her lips and nodded toward the cookie counter.

Mrs. Snopes picked out a four gram, elongated piece of banana oatmeal cookie ornamented with cream and cinnamon hallucinogenic sprinkles. She paid for it with the story of how her sister Melva had run away from home when she was eleven and they had found her two days later sleeping in the neighbor's treehouse. They had heard the story before, but not the part about the hair dryer. Fast Eddie earned an audience credit on the Barrows's Memory Exchange but the cognisphere deposited an extra quarter point into Mrs. Snopes's account for the new detail, according to the Laughing Cookie's MemEx register. Afterward, Fast Eddie insisted that Rain admire the banana oatmeal crumb before he wrapped it up for Mrs. Snopes. Rain had to agree it was quite striking. She said it reminded her of Emily Dickinson.

They closed the Very Memorial Library early. Usually after work, Will and Rain swept some of Eddie's cookie dust into a baggie and went looking for a spot to picnic. Their favorites were the overlook at the southwestern edge of town and the roof of the Button Factory, although on a hot day they also liked the mossy coolness of the abandoned fallout shelter.

But not this unhappy day. Almost as soon as they stepped onto Onion Street, they were fighting. *First she* suggested that Will show her his book. *Then he* said not yet and asked if she had any idea why the dogs were asking about it. *Then she* said no—perhaps a jot too emphatically—*because he* apparently understood her to be puzzled as to why dogs should care about a nobody like him. *Then he* wondered aloud if maybe she wasn't just a little jealous, *which she* said was a dumb thing to say, *which he* took exactly the wrong way.

Will informed her icily that he was going home because he needed to make changes to Chapter Four. Alarmed at how their row had escalated, Rain suggested that maybe they could meet later. He just shrugged and turned away. Stung, she watched him jog down Onion Street.

Later, maybe—being together with Will had never sounded so contingent.

Rain decided to blame the dogs. It was hard enough staying sane here in Nowhere, finding the courage each day not to step off the edge. They didn't need yet another cancerous mystery eating at their lives. And Will was just a kid, she reminded herself. Nineteen, male, impulsive, too smart for his own good, but years from being wise. Of course he was entitled to his moods. She'd always waited him out before, because even though he made her toes curl in frustration sometimes, she did love the boy.

In the meantime, there was no way around it: she'd have to ask Chance Conrad about *The Last President.* She took a right onto Abbey Road, nodding curtly at the passersby. She knew what most people thought about her: that she was impatient and bitter and that she preferred books to people. Of course, they were all wrong, but she had given up trying to explain herself. She ignored Bingo Finn slouching in the entrance to Goriot's Pachinko Palazzo and hurried past Linton's Fruit and Daily Spectator, the Prynne Building, and the drunks at the outdoor tables in front of the Sunspot. She noticed with annoyance that the Drew Barrymore version of *The Wizard of Oz* was playing for another week at the Ziegfowl Feelies. At Uncle Buddy's she took a right, then a left onto Fairview which dead ended in the grassy bulk of the Barrow.

Everything in Nowhere had come out of the Barrow: Rain's fountain pen, the books in the Very Memorial Library, Will's endless packs of blank, loose-leaf paper, Fast Eddie's crystal trays and Mrs. Snopes's yoga mats. And, of course, all the people.

The last thing Rain remembered about the world was falling asleep in her husband Roger's arms. It had been a warm night in May 2009. Roger had worked late so they had ordered a sausage and green pepper pizza and had watched the last half hour of *The African Queen* before they went to bed. It was *so* romantic, even if Nicholson and Garbo were old. She could remember Roger doing his atrocious Nicholson imitation while he brushed his teeth. They had cuddled briefly in the dark but he said he was too tired to make love. They must have kissed good night—yes, no doubt a long and tender last kiss. One of the things she hated most about Nowhere was that she couldn't remember any of Roger's kisses or his face or what he looked like naked. He was just a warm, pale, friendly blur. Some people in Nowhere said it was a mercy that nobody could remember the ones they had loved in the world. Rain was not one of those people.

Will said that the last thing he remembered was falling asleep in his *Nintendo and American Culture* class at Northern Arizona University in the fall of 2023. He could recall everything about the two sexual conquests he had managed in his brief time in the world—Talley Lotterhand and Paula Herbst—but then by his own admission he had never really been in love.

The Barrow was a warehouse buried under the mesa. Rain climbed down to the loading dock and knocked on the sectional steel door. After a few moments she heard the whine of an electric motor as the door clattered up on its tracks. Chance Conrad stood just inside, blinking in the afternoon sunlight. He was a handsome, graying man, who balanced a receding hairline with a delicate beard. Although he had a light step and an easy manner, the skin under his eyes was dark and pouchy. Some said this was because Chance didn't sleep much since he was so busy managing the Barrow. Others maintained that he didn't sleep at all, because he hadn't been revived like the rest of the residents of Nowhere. He was a construct of the cognisphere. It stood to reason, people said. How could anyone with a name like Chance Conrad be real?

"Lorraine!" he said. "And here I was about to write this day off as a total loss." He put his hand on her shoulder and urged her through the entrance. "Come, come in." Chance had no use for daylight; that was another strike against his being real. Once the Barrow was safely locked down again he relaxed. "So," he said, "here we are, just the two of us. I'm hoping this means you've finally dumped the boy genius?"

Rain had long since learned that the best way to deflect Chance's relentless flirting was just to ignore it. As far as she knew, he had never taken a lover. She took a deep breath and counted to five. *Unu, du, tri, kvar, kvin*. The air in the Barrow had the familiar damp weight she remembered from when she first woke up at Nowhere; it settled into Rain's lungs like a cold. Before her were crates and jars and barrels and boxes of goods that the people of Nowhere had asked the cognisphere to recreate. Later that night Ferdie Raskolnikov and his crew would load the lot onto trucks for delivery around town tomorrow.

"What's this?" Rain bent to examine a wide-bladed shovel cast with a solid steel handle. It was so heavy that she could barely lift it.

"Shelly Castorp thinks she's planting daffodils with this." Chance shook his head. "I told her that the handles of garden tools were always made of wood but she claims her father had a shovel just like that one." He shook his head. "The specific gravity of steel is 7.80 grams per cubic centimeter, you know."

"Oh?" When Rain let the handle go, the shovel clanged against the cement floor. "Can we grow daffodils?"

"We'll see." Chance muscled the shovel back into place on its pallet. He probably didn't appreciate her handling other people's orders. "I'm racking my brains trying to remember if I've got something here for you. But I don't, do I?"

"How about those binoculars I keep asking for?"

"I send the requests. . . ." He spread his hands. "They all bounce." The corners of his mouth twitched. "So is this about us? At long last?"

"I'm just looking for a book, Chance. A novel."

"Oh," he said, crestfallen. "Better come to the office."

Normally if Rain wanted to add a book to the Very Memorial Library, she'd call Chance and put in an order. Retrieving books was usually no problem for the collective intelligence of humanity, which had uploaded itself into the cognisphere sometime in the late twenty-third century. All

it needed was an author and title. Failing that, a plot description or even just a memorable line might suffice for the cognisphere to perform a plausible, if not completely accurate, reconstruction of some lost text. In fact, depending on the quality of the description, the cognisphere would recreate a version of pretty much anything the citizens of Nowhere could remember from the world.

Exactly how it accomplished this, and more important, why it bothered, was a mystery.

Chance's office was tucked into the rear of the Barrow, next to the crèche. On the way, they passed the Big Board of the MemEx, which tracked audience and storyteller accounts for all the residents of Nowhere and sorted and cataloged the accumulated memories. Chance stopped by the crèche to check the vitals of Rahim Aziz, who was destined to become the newest citizen of Nowhere, thus bringing the population back up to the standard 853. Rahim was to be an elderly man with a crown of snowy white hair surrounding an oval bald spot. He was replacing Lucy Panza, the tennis pro and Town Calligrapher, who had gone missing two weeks ago and was presumed to have thrown herself over the edge without telling anyone.

"Old Aziz isn't quite as easy on the eye as you were," said Chance, who never failed to remind Rain that he had seen her naked during her revival. Rahim floated on his back in a clear tube filled with a yellow, serous fluid. He had a bit of a paunch and the skin of his legs and under his arms was wrinkled. Rain noted with distaste that he had a penis tattoo of an elephant.

"When will you decant him?"

Chance rubbed a thumb across a readout shell built into the wall of the crèche. "Tomorrow, maybe." The shell meant nothing to Rain. "Tuesday at the latest."

Chance Conrad's office was not so much decorated as overstuffed. Dolls and crystal and tools and fossils and clocks jostled across shelves and the tops of cabinets and chests. The walls were covered with pix from feelies made after Rain's time in the world, although she had seen some of them at the Ziegfowl. She recognized Oud's *Birthdeath,* Fay Wray in full fetish from *Time StRanger* and the wedding cake scene from *Two of Neala*. Will claimed the feelies had triggered the cancerous growth of history—when all the dead actors and sports stars and politicians started having second careers, the past had consumed the present.

"So this is about a novel then?" Chance moved behind his desk but did not sit down. "Called?" He waved a hand over his desktop and its eye winked at him.

"*The Last President*." Rain sat in the chair opposite him.

"Precedent as in a time-honored custom, or president as in Marie Louka?"

"The latter."

He chuckled. "You know, you're the only person in this town who would say *the latter*. I love that. Would you have my baby?"

"No."

"Marry me?"

"Uh-uh."

"Sleep with me?"

"*Chance.*"

He sighed. "Who's the author?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?" Chance rubbed under his eyes with the heels of his hands. "You're sure about that? You wouldn't care to take a wild guess? Last name begins with the letter . . . what? A through K? L through Z?"

"Sorry."

He stepped from behind the desk and his desktop shut its eye. "Well, the damn doggie didn't know either, which is why I couldn't help him."

Rain groaned. "He's been here already?"

"Him and a couple of his pooch pals." Chance opened the igloo which stood humming beside the door. "Cooler?" He pulled out a frosty pitcher filled with something thick and glaucous. "It's just broccoli nectar and a little ethanol-style vodka."

Rain shook her head. "But that doesn't make sense." She could hear the whine in her voice. "They're agents of the cognisphere, right? And you access the cognisphere. Why would it ask you to ask itself?"

"Exactly." Chance closed the door and locked it. This struck Rain as odd; maybe he was afraid that Ferdi Raskolnikov would barge in on them. "Things have been loopy here lately," he said. "You should see some of the mistakes we've had to send back." He poured broccoli cocktail for himself. It oozed from the pitcher and landed in his coffee mug with a thick *plop*. "I've spent all afternoon trying to convince myself that the dogs are some kind of a workaround, maybe to jog some lost data loose from the MemEx." He replaced the pitcher in the igloo and settled onto the chair behind his desk. "But now you show up and I'm wondering: Why is Rain asking me for this book?"

She frowned. "I ask you for all my books."

He considered for a moment, tapping the finger against his forehead and then pointed at her. "Let me tell you a story." Rain started to object that she had neither goods nor services to offer him in return and she had just drained her MemEx account to dry spit, but he silenced her with a wave. "No, this one is free." He took a sip of liquid broccoli. "An audience credit unencumbered, offered to the woman of my dreams."

She stuck out her tongue.

"Why does this place exist?" he asked.

"The Barrow?"

"Nowhere."

"Ah, eschatology." She laughed bitterly. "Well, Father Samsa claims this is the afterlife, although I'll be damned if I know whether it's heaven or hell."

"I know you don't believe *that*," said Chance. "So then this is some game that the cognisphere is playing? We're virtual chesspersons?"

Rain shrugged.

"What happens when we step off the edge?"

"Nobody knows." Just then a cacophony of clocks yawped, pinged, and buzzed in six o'clock. "This isn't much of a story, Chance."

"Patience, love. So you think the cognisphere recreated us for a reason?"

"Maybe. Okay, sure." A huge spider with eight paintbrush legs shook itself and stretched on a teak cabinet. "We're in a zoo. A museum."

"Or maybe some kind of primitive backup. The cognisphere keeps us around because there's a chance that it might fail, go crazy—I don't know. If that happened, we could start over."

"Except we'd all die without the cognisphere." The spider stepped onto the wall and picked its way toward the nearest corner. "And nobody's made any babies that I know of. We're not exactly Adam and Eve material, Chance."

"But that's damn scary, no? Makes the case that none of us is real."

Rain liked him better when he was trying to coax her into bed. "Enough." She pushed her chair back and started to get up.

"Okay, okay." He held up his hands in surrender. "Story time. When I was a kid, I used to collect meanies."

"Meanies?" She settled back down.

"Probably after your time. They were 'bots, about so big." He held forefinger and thumb a couple of centimeters apart. "Little fighting toys. There were gorilla meanies and ghoul meanies and Nazi meanies and demon meanies and dino meanies. Fifty-two in all, one for every week of the year. You set them loose in the meanie arena and they would try to kill one another. If they died, they'd shut down for twenty-four hours. Now if meanies fought one on one, they would always draw. But when you formed them into teams, their powers combined in different ways. For instance, a ghoul and Nazi team could defeat any other team of two—except the dino and yeti. For the better part of a year, I rushed home from school every day to play with the things. I kept trying combinations until I could pretty much predict the outcome of every battle. Then I lost interest."

"Speaking of losing interest," said Rain, who was distracted by the spider decorating the corner of Chance's office in traceries of blue and green.

"I'm getting there." He shifted uncomfortably in his chair, and took another sip from the mug. "So a couple of years go by and I'm twelve now. One night I'm in my room and I hear this squeaking coming from under my bed. I pull out the old meanie arena, which has been gathering dust all this time, and I see that a mouse has blundered into it and is being attacked by a squad of meanies. And just like that I'm fascinated with them all over again. For weeks I drop crickets and frogs and garter snakes into the arena and watch them try to survive."

"That's sick."

"No question. But then boys can't help themselves when it comes to mindless cruelty. Anyway, it didn't last. The wildlife was too hard on the poor little 'bots." He drained the last of the broccoli. "But the point is that I got bored playing with a closed set of meanies. Even though I hadn't actually tried all possible combinations, after a while I could see that nothing much new was ever going to happen. But then the mouse changed everything." He leaned forward across the desk. "So let me propose a thought experiment to you, my lovely Lorraine. This mysterious novel that everyone is so eager to find? What if the last name of the author be-

gan with the letter . . ." He paused and then seemed to pluck something out of the air. "Oh, let's say 'W'."

Rain started.

"And just for the sake of argument, let's suppose that the first name also begins with 'W.' . . . Ah, I see from your expression that this thought has also occurred to you."

"It's not him," said Rain. "He was revived at nineteen; he's just a kid. Why would the cognisphere care anything about him?"

"Because he's the mouse in our sad, little arena. He isn't simply recycling memories of the world like the rest of us. The novel your doggies are looking for doesn't exist in the cognisphere, never did. Because it's being written right here, right now. Maybe imagination is in short supply wherever the doggies come from. Lord knows there isn't a hell of a lot of it in Nowhere."

Rain would have liked to deny it, but she could feel the insult sticking to her. "How do you know he's writing a novel?"

"I supply the paper, Rain. Reams and reams of it. Besides, this may be hell, as Father Samsa insists, but it's also a small town. We meddle in each other's business, what else is there to do?" His voice softened; Rain thought that if Chance ever did take a lover, this would be how he might speak to her. "Is the book any good? Because if it is, I'd like to read it."

"I don't know." At that moment, Rain felt a drop of something cold hit the back of her hand. There was a dot the color of sky on her knuckle. She looked up at the spider hanging from the ceiling on an azure thread. "He doesn't show it to me. Your toy is dripping."

"Really?" Chance came around the desk. "A woman of your considerable charms is taking no for an answer?" He reached up and cradled the spider into his arms. "Go get him, Rain, You don't want to keep your mouse waiting." He carried the spider to the teak cabinet.

Rain rubbed at the blue spot on her hand but the stain had penetrated her skin. She couldn't even smudge it.

But Will wasn't waiting, at least not for Rain. She stopped by their apartment but he wasn't there and he hadn't left a note. Neither was he at the Button Factory nor Queequeg's Kava Cave. She looked in at the Laughing Cookie just as Fast Eddie was locking up. No Will. She finally tracked him down at the overlook, by the blue picnic table under the chestnut trees.

Normally they came here for the view, which was spectacular. A field of wildflowers, tidy-tips and mullein and tickseed and bindweed, sloped steeply down to the edge of the mesa. But Will was paying no attention to the scenery. He had scattered a stack of five loose-leaf binders across the table; the whole of *The Great American Novel* or *The Last President* or whatever the hell it was called. Three of the binders were open. He was reading—but apparently not writing in—a fourth. A No. 2 pencil was tucked behind his ear. Something about Will's body language disturbed Rain. He usually sprawled awkwardly wherever he came to rest, a giraffe trying to settle on a hammock. Now he was gathered into himself, hunched over the binder like an old man. Rain came up behind him and kneaded his shoulders for a moment.

He leaned back and sighed.

"Sorry about this afternoon." She bent to nibble his ear. "Have you eaten?"

"No." He kissed the air in front of him but did not look at her.

She peeked at the loose-leaf page in front of him and tried to decipher the handwriting, which was not quite as legible as an EEG chart. . . . *knelt before the coffin, her eyes wide in the dim holy light of the cathedral. His face was wavy* . . . No, thought Rain straightening up before he suspected that she was reading. Not *wavy*. *Waxy*. "Beautiful evening," she said.

Will shut the binder he had been reading and gazed distractedly toward the horizon.

Rain had not been completely honest with Chance. It was true that Will hadn't shown her the novel, but she *had* read some of it. She had stolen glimpses over his shoulder or read upside down when she was sitting across from him. Then there was the one guilty afternoon when she had come back to their apartment and gobbled up pages 34-52 before her conscience mastered her curiosity. The long passage had taken place in a bunker during one of the Resource Wars. The President of Great America, Lawrence Goodman, had been reminiscing with his former mistress and current National Security Advisor, Rebecca Santorino, about Akron, where they had first fallen in love years ago and which had just been obliterated in retaliation for an American strike on Zhengzhou. Two pages later they were thrashing on the president's bed and ripping each other's clothes off. Rain had begun this part with great interest, hoping to gain new insight into Will's sexual tastes, but had closed the binder uneasily just as the president was tying his lover to the Louis XVI armoire with silk Atura neckties.

Will closed the other open binders and stacked all five into a pile. Then he pulled the pencil from behind his ear, snapped it in two, and let the pieces roll out of his hand under the picnic table. He gave her an odd, lopsided smile.

"Will, what's the matter?" Rain stared. "Are you okay?"

In response, he pulled a baggie of cookie dust from his shirt pocket and jiggled it.

"Here?" she said, coloring. "In plain sight?" Usually they hid out when they were eating dust, at least until they weathered the first rush. The Cocoa Peanut Butter Chunk made them giggly and not a little stupid. Macaroon Sandies often hit Rain like powdered lust.

"There's no one to see." Will licked his forefinger and stuck it into the bag. "Besides, what if there was?" He extended the finger toward her, the tip and nail coated with the parti-colored powder. "Does anyone here care what we do?"

She considered telling him then what Chance Conrad had said about small towns, but she could see that Will was having a mood. So she just opened her mouth and obediently stuck her tongue out. As he rotated the finger across the middle of her tongue, she tasted the sweet, spicy grit. She closed her mouth on the finger and he pulled it slowly through her lips.

"Now you," she said, reaching for the baggie. They always fed each other cookie dust.

Rain and Will sat on the tabletop with their feet on the seat, facing the slope that led down to the edge of Nowhere. The world beneath the impossibly high cliff was impossibly flat, but this was still Rain's favorite lookout, even if it was probably an illusion. The land stretched out in a kind of grid with rectangles in every color of green: the brooding green of forests, the dreaming green of fields under cultivation, and the confused gray-green of scrub land. Dividing the rectangles were ribbons the color of wet sand. Rain liked to think they were roads, although she had never spotted any traffic on them. She reached for Will's hand and he closed it around hers. He was right: she didn't care if anyone saw them together like this. His skin was warm and rough. As she rubbed her finger over the back of his hand, she thought she could make out a faded blue spot. But maybe it was a trick of the twilight, or a cookie hallucination.

The rectangles and the ribbons of the land to the southwest had always reminded her of something, but she had never quite been able to figure out what. Now as Eddie's magic cookie dust sparked through her bloodstream, and she felt Will's warm hand in hers, she thought of a trip she had taken with her father when she was just a kid to a museum in an old city called Manhilton, that got blown up afterward. In the museum were very old pix that just hung on the wall and mostly didn't do anything, and she remembered taking a cab to get there and the cabbie had asked what her name was but she wouldn't tell him so he called her *little girl* which she didn't like because she was seven already, and the museum had escalators that whispered music, and there was one really, really big room filled with pix of all blurry water lilies, and outside in a sculpture garden there were statues made of metal and rocks but there were no flowers because it was cold so she and Dad didn't stay out there very long and inside again were lots of pix of women with three eyes and too many corners and then some wide blue men blocked her view of the Mona Lisa so she never really saw that one, which everyone said later was supposed to be so special but one she did see and remembered now was a pix of a grid that had colored rectangles and with ribbons of red and yellow separating them, and she asked her dad if it was a map of the museum and he laughed down at her because her dad was so tall, tall as any statue and he said the pix wasn't a map, it was a *mondrian* and she asked him what a *mondrian* was and then he laughed again and she laughed and it was so easy to laugh in those days and Will was laughing too.

"I want to go down there." He laughed as he pointed down at the mondrian which stretched into the rosy distance.

"There?" Rain didn't understand; the best part of her was still in the museum with her father. "Why?"

"Because there are people living there. Must be why Chance won't give out binoculars or telescopes." He let go of her hand. "Because it's not here."

"You're going to step over the edge?" Her voice rose in alarm.

"No, silly." He leapt up, stood on the tabletop and raised his arms to the sky. "I'm going to climb down."

"But that's the same thing."

"No, it isn't. I'll show you." He slid off the picnic table and started toward the thicket of scruffy evergreens and brambles that had overgrown the edge of Nowhere. He walked along this tangle until he came to a bit of blue rag tied to a branch, glanced over his shoulder to see if she was still with him, and then wriggled into the scrub. Rain followed.

They emerged into a tiny clearing. She sidled beside him and he slipped an arm around her waist to brace her. The cliff was steep here but not sheer. She could make out a narrow dirt track that switched back through scree and stunted fir. Maybe a mountain goat could negotiate it, if there were any mountain goats. But a single misstep would send Will plunging headlong. And then there was the Drop. Everyone knew about the Drop. They traded stories about it all the time. Scary stories. She was about to ask him why, if there were people down there, they hadn't climbed up for a visit, when he kicked a stone over the edge. They watched it bounce straight down and disappear over a ledge.

"Lucy Panza showed me this," said Will, his face flushed with excitement.

Rain wondered when he'd had time to go exploring the edge with Lucy Panza. "But she stepped over the edge."

"No," he said. "She didn't."

She considered the awful slope for a moment and shuddered. "I'm not going down there, Will."

He continued peering down the dirt track. "I know," he said.

The calm with which he said it was like a slap in the face. She stared at him, speechless, until he finally met her gaze. "I'll come back for you." He gave her the goofy, apologetic grin he always summoned up when he upset her. "I'll make sure the path is safe and I'll make all kinds of friends down at the bottom and when the time is right, I'll be back."

"But what about your book?"

He blew a dismissive breath between his lips. "I'm all set with that."

"It's finished?"

"It's crap, Rain." His voice was flat. "I'm not wasting any more time writing about some stupid made-up president. There are no more presidents. And how can anyone write the Great American Novel when there is no more America?" He caught his breath. "Sorry," he said. "I know that's what you wanted me to do." He gave her a sour smile. "You're welcome to read it if you want. Or hand it over to the dogs. That should be good for a laugh." Then he pulled her into his arms and kissed her.

Of course Rain kissed him back. She wanted to drag him down on top of her and rip his clothes off, although there really wasn't enough room here to make love. She would even have let him take her on the picnic table, *tie her* to the damn table, if that's what he had wanted. But his wasn't the kind of kiss that started anything.

"So I'm coming back, I promise," he murmured into her ear. "Just tell everyone that you're waiting for me."

"Wait a minute." She twisted away from him. "You're going now? It's almost dark. We just ate cookie dust." She couldn't believe he was serious. This was such a typical boneheaded-Will stunt he was pulling. "Come

home, honey," she said. "Get some sleep. Things might look different in the morning."

He stroked her hair. "I've got at least another hour of light," he said. "Believe me, I've thought about this a long time, Rain." Then he brushed his finger against her lips. "I love you."

He took a step over the edge and another. He had gone about a dozen meters before his feet went out from beneath him and he fell backwards, skidding on his rear end and clutching at the scrub. But he caught himself almost immediately and looked up at her, his face pale as the moon. "Oops!" he called cheerfully.

Rain stood at the edge of the cliff long after she could no longer see him. She was hoping that he'd come to a dead end and have to turn back. The sun was painting the horizon with fire by the time she fetched Will's binders to the edge of Nowhere. She opened one after another and shook the pages free. They fluttered into the twilight like an exaltation of larks. A few landed briefly on the path before launching themselves again into the breeze and following their creator out of her life. When all the pages had disappeared, Rain took the whistle that the dogs had given her and hurled it as far into the mondrian as she could.

Only then did she let herself cry. She thought she deserved it.

Rain found her way through the gathering darkness back to the apartment over Vronsky's Laundromat and Monkeyfilter Bowladrome. She put some Szechwan lasagna into the microwave and pushed it around her plate for a while, but she was too numb to be hungry. She would have gone to the eight o'clock show at the Ziegfowl just to get out, but she was mortally tired of *The Wizard of Oz*, no matter whom the cognisphere recast in it. The apartment depressed her. The problem, she decided, was that she was surrounded by Will's stuff; she'd have to move it somewhere out of sight.

She placed a short stack of college-lined, loose-leaf paper and four unopened reams in a box next to *The Awakening, The Big Snooze,* and *Drinking the Snow*. Will had borrowed the novels from the Very Memorial Library but had made way too many marginal notes in them for her to return them to the stacks. Rain would have to order new ones from Chance in the Barrow. She threw his Buffalo Soldiers warmup jacket on top of several dusty pairs of Adidas Kloud Nine running shoes. Will's dresser drawers produced eight pairs of white socks, two black, a half dozen gray jockey shorts, three pairs of jeans, and a stack of t-shirts sporting pix of Panafrican shoutcast bands. At the bottom of the sock drawer, Rain discovered flash editions of *Superheterodyne Adventure Stories 2020-26* and *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Fetish*. She pulled his mustard collection and climkies and homebrew off the kitchen shelves.

And that was all it took to put Will out of her life. She shouldn't have been surprised. After all, they had only lived together for just over a year.

She was trying to talk herself into throwing the lot of it out the next morning when the doorglass blinked. She glanced at the clock. Who did she know that would come visiting at 10:30 at night? When she opened the door, Baskerville, Rover, and Spot looked up at her.

"You found the book?" The bloodhound's bowtie was crooked.

Beneath her, Rain could hear the rumble and clatter of the bowling lanes. "There is no book."

"May we come in?"

"No."

"You threw the whistle off the edge," said Baskerville.

As if on signal, the two terriers sat. They looked to Rain as if they were settling in for a stay. "Where's Will?" said Rover.

She wanted to kick the door shut hard enough to knock their bowler hats off, but the terrier's question took her breath away. If the cognisphere had lost track of Will, then maybe he wasn't . . . maybe he was . . . "I hate dogs," she said. "Maybe I forgot to mention that?"

Baskerville regarded her with his solemn chocolate eyes and said nothing.

The terrier's hind leg scratched at his flank. "Has something happened to him?" he asked.

"Stop it!" Rain stomped her foot on the doorsill and all three dogs jumped. "You want a story and I want information. Deal?"

The dogs thought it over, then Rover got up and licked her hand.

"Okay, story." But at that moment, Rain's throat seemed to close, as if she had tried to swallow the page of a book. *Will was gone*. If she said it aloud, it would become just another story on the MemEx. But she had to know. "M-My boyfriend climbed over the edge a couple of hours ago trying to find a way down the cliff. I pitched the goddamn novel he was writing after him. The end."

"But what does this have to do with *The Last President*?"

"That was the name of his book. Used to be. Once." She was out of breath. "Okay, you got a story. Now you owe me some god-damn truth. He's dead, right? You've absorbed him already."

Rover started to say, "I'm afraid that we have no knowledge of . . ." But she didn't give the dog a chance to finish; she slammed the door.

She decided then not to throw Will's things out. She dragged them all into the bedroom closet and covered the pile with the electric blanket. She made one more pass around the apartment to make sure she had everything. Then she decided to make a grocery list so she could stop at Cereno's on the way home from work tomorrow. That's when she discovered that she had nothing to write on. She gave herself permission to retrieve a couple of pages of Will's paper from the closet—just this once. As long as she was writing the list, she didn't have to think about Will on the cliff or the dogs in the hall. She cracked the apartment door just enough to see that all three of them were still there, heads on paws, asleep. Spot's ear twitched but he didn't wake up. She sat on the couch with the silence ringing in her ears until she got up and muscled the dresser over to block the closet where she had put Will's stuff. She thought about brushing her teeth and trying for sleep but she knew that would be a waste of time. She was browsing the books on her bookshelf, all of which she had long since read to tatters, when the phone squawked.

Rain was sure it was the dogs calling, but decided to pick up just in case.

"Lorraine Carraway?"

Rain recognized Sheriff Renfield's drawl and was immediately annoyed. He was one of her best customers—an avid Georgette Heyer fan—and knew better than to call her by her proper name.

"Speaking, Beej. What's up?"

"There's been some trouble down to the Laughing Cookie." He was slurring words. He pronounced *There is* as *Thersh*.

"Trouble?"

"Fast Eddie said you had dogs in the store today. Dogs with hats."

"What kind of trouble, Beej? Is Eddie all right?"

"He's fine, we're all just fine." Everybody knew that Beej Renfield was a drinker and nobody blamed him for it. Being sheriff was possibly the most boring job in Nowhere. "But there's been what you might call vandalism. Books all over the place, Rain, some of them ripped up good. Teeth marks. And the place stinks of piss. Must've happened an hour, maybe two ago. Fast Eddie is ripping mad. I need you to come down here and lay some calm on him. Will you do that for me, Rain?"

"I'll do you one better, Beej. You're looking for these dogs?"

His breath rasped in the receiver so loud she could almost smell it.

"Because I've got them here if you're interested. Right outside my door."

"I'm on my way."

"Oh, and Beej? You might want to bring some help."

She sat at the kitchen table to wait. In front of her were the shopping list and the No. 2 pencil. They reminded her of Will. He was such a strong boy, everybody in town always said so. He *had* run that 4:21 mile, after all. And she was almost certain that Baskerville had looked surprised when she'd told him that Will was climbing down the cliff. What did surprise look like on a dog? She'd see for sure when Beej Renfield arrived.

For the very first time Rain allowed herself to consider the possibility that Will wasn't dead or absorbed. Maybe the cognisphere ended at the edge of Nowhere. In which case, he might actually come back for her.

But why would he bother? What had she ever done to deserve him? Her shopping list lay in front of her like an accusation. Was this all her life was about? Toilet paper and Seventy-Up and duck sausage? Will had climbed over the edge of Nowhere. What chance had she ever taken? She needed to do *something*, something no one had ever done before. She'd had enough of books and all the old stories about the world that the cognisphere was sorting on the MemEx. That world was gone, forever and ever, amen.

She picked up the pencil again.

I scowled at the dogs through the plate glass window of the Very Memorial Library. They squatted in a row next to my book drop. There were three of them, haughty in their bowler hats and silk vests. They acted like they owned the air. Bad dogs, I knew that for sure, created out of spit and tears and heartbreak by the spirits of all the uncountable dead and sent to spy on the survivors and cause at least three different kinds of trouble.

I wasn't worried. We'd seen their kind before. ○

THE ICE-CREAM MAN

James Van Pelt

"The Ice-Cream Man" takes place in the same world as James Van Pelt's "The Last of the O-Forms" (*Asimov's*, September 2002), which was a finalist for the Nebula award. A new collection of the author's short fiction, *The Last Of The O-Forms and Other Stories* should be available from Fairwood Press later this year. In the meantime, he is working on a book for writers about plot. For more information, visit *http://www.sff.net/people/james.van.pelt.*

Keegan chose a song from the truck's jukebox after he crossed 6th Street going south on University Boulevard: "You are My Sunshine." It was his Thursday route. The music boomed through the loudspeakers, echoing from the late nineteenth century houses. Within a minute, doors opened, people wandered down their sidewalks and waited for him on the street. He muted the song as the truck slowed to a stop. Even through his dark sunglasses, the sun was too bright. Every reflective surface bounced the light in painful intensity. He squinted against the intrusions.

An old lady in a broad-brimmed hat that shadowed her face and a lacy blouse that covered her neck to her chin looked up at him. "Do you have strawberry today?"

He handed her a cone with a single scoop.

The tip of her tongue touched the treat. She closed her eyes and sighed. "Best strawberry ice cream in the world."

He snapped his fingers. "Over-ripe strawberries are the secret. They're sweeter. You're lucky they're in season."

The lady put a pint of bourbon on the counter. "Will this do?"

Keegan held it to the sunlight, where it glowed like golden honey. "That's a couple weeks' worth, darling."

She blushed. "I need a box of .22 longs if you have them. Something's been in my backyard the last few nights."

Keegan searched below the counter. "Short rounds, short rounds, short rounds." He moved the small boxes aside. "Ah, here we go, .22 longs. That would make us even."

Behind her frowned a middle-aged man with a tiny black mustache like a charcoaled smudge below his nose. "Where do you get the ammo, harelip?"

Keegan resisted the urge to cover his mouth. He smiled instead. "It's all in trade. I have something someone wants. Somebody else has something I want. What do you want?"

"Nobody trades bullets. They hoard them." He looked suspiciously at the truck. "And how do I know your ice cream is any good?"

Another man a couple folks back in the line said, "Are you going to order, Rich, or are you going to be a pain in the ass? Doesn't matter if it's good or not. You can't get ice cream anywhere else."

The man scowled. "Vanilla."

Keegan turned his back to get another cone from behind him. He rubbed his nostril with his thumb, and as he scooped the ice cream he pressed the thumb firmly into the frozen ball before plopping it into place. "There you go, mister," he said. "Since it's your first time, it's on the house."

The next customer wanted a double scoop of chocolate, which Keegan let him have for a nearly full bottle of powdered cinnamon.

"Can't get enough good spices," said Keegan to the man who'd defended him. "How are you doing, Laird?"

Laird leaned on the counter, his tanned arm a sharp contrast to the polished aluminum, liver spots sprinkled across the top of his hand like the map of an island chain. "Pretty good, Keegan. You put a booger in his ice cream, didn't you?"

Keegan grinned. "I didn't charge him."

"Maple-walnut for me, if you have it."

The ice cream rolled smoothly into the scoop. Keegan liked the cold air caressing his wrists. It felt better than the waves of heat rising from the asphalt outside the truck, and it was only eleven o'clock. Good for business. Hard to work in.

Laird licked a drip off the cone before it reached his hand. "Can't really blame the guy for his bad temper. He moved in a month ago. No territory. No prospects. Some muta-bastard broke into his house and tore up most of his stores, so he's feeling pinched."

"Is he thinking of scavenging north of Colfax Avenue?" Keegan closed the freezer lid. No need to let the product melt, and the truck used less fuel if the refrigerator unit wasn't working the whole time. "I wouldn't recommend going alone."

"You don't seem to have trouble."

Keegan swept a damp rag the length of the counter, keeping his eyes down. "I know the area."

"Speaking of that, did you find the item I asked for?"

"It's rare. Really rare." The rag swung loosely in Keegan's hand as he leaned against the cabinets, squinting through his sunglasses at the sunlight outside the truck's dark interior. The last two people in line, a mid-

dle-aged couple he'd served several times before, wiped their foreheads in unison. Like most folks, they didn't look at his face. He wanted to cover his mouth again.

Laird sighed. "All right. I can double the sugar for next month." He leaned forward to whisper, "I found a cache you wouldn't believe. Geezer who'd filled a double-car garage with goodies before kicking off."

"Great." Keegan pulled two boxes of 12-gauge shotgun shells from under the counter. He rattled them before putting them down. "Got a project?"

Laird pocketed the boxes. "Nope. The boys on the Colfax fence say they're having breakthroughs every night. I want more punch for my dollar. Whatever tore into Rich's house went through the bars on his window. Something new south of the fence, evidently. One of these days I'm afraid I'm going to stumble on a mutoid that's all teeth, scales, tentacles, and bad attitude, and I don't want to face it with a popgun."

"You could move to the country like everyone else."

Laird turned to look down the street. Many of the houses were boarded up, their windows staring into the street like blind eyes. On other houses, bars covered the windows and doors. Barbed wire separated them from their neighbors. "What, and leave all this? There's still a lot of scavenging to do before I start scratching dirt for a living. Besides, farms have mutoid problems too." He licked the last of the ice cream out of the cone. "Could you sweeten this up?"

Keegan dropped another scoop on the cone.

Laird said, "The ammo question was dumb. You know the one I want answered?"

Keegan looked at him through his sunglasses.

"Where do you get the cream? The last true cow died twenty years ago."

"I have good freezers."

Laird laughed. "See you next Thursday." He walked away, waving as he went.

The last couple both wanted raspberry, but Keegan didn't have any. They settled for a scoop each of chocolate macadamia nut. He placed the set of four sundae glasses they'd brought on the floor. The woman looked suspiciously at her cone.

"Just ice cream in that one, ma'am," he said.

When he drove away, he flicked the music back on, "Little Brown Jug." A couple of blocks later, a new crowd gathered. By one o'clock, he was sold out.

Driving the ice cream truck had been Keegan's first job out of high school. In the dispatch office, Old Josh Granger had handed him the route and an inventory sheet along with the keys to the truck. "Drive slow in the neighborhoods," he said. "Nothing sadder than a little kid who can't catch the ice cream truck."

Keegan nodded.

"Not that there's kids anymore." Granger sat heavily on a stool, cupping his hands over his knees. "God, I remember when the five-year-olds would chase me down. Scads of them. Couldn't even get their change up

to the counter. Little hands holding money. Do you remember kids?" Granger looked out the window onto the lot where the trucks were parked. Canvas covered six of them. "You're what, eighteen? No, you wouldn't. You're one of the last batch."

Keegan ground the toe of his sneaker into the cement. "They'll find out what's causing it. I heard the news the other night. They're making headway."

Granger sighed. "Do you have a girl?"

Keegan blushed. "They don't seem to take to me." He scratched his nose, covering his mouth.

"Humph! Sorry, son. Maybe it's for the better. Save you the heartache. No ultrasound horror show. No little bundle buried in the backyard for you. . . ." He trailed off. A muscle in his arm twitched, but he didn't seem to notice. "Nobody gives you guff about it, do they?"

"No, sir. They're all real nice." Keegan thought about the whispers in the school hallway. Once he'd heard an entire conversation. "Do you think he's a mutation?" someone had said. "Nah," said someone else. "Cleft palate. It's just a birth defect."

Granger said, "Don't they have operations to fix that?"

"I had it. You should have seen it before."

For the rest of the summer, Keegan drove the truck. Kids his own age and older waited for him. In the shadows, they hardly noticed his face. "I want a bomb pop," one would say. "Ice cream sandwich," said another. For a summer, he drove the town, music filling his ears: "Home on the Range" and "London Bridge" and "The Yellow Rose of Texas," calling, calling, and the folks came out, remembering in the music what it must have been like to be five. He imagined them as children, running after him, their eyes on fire, laughter in their throats. It was the best summer of his life. Then, in August, the company went under, and he had to turn in his keys.

When he left his last inventory in the dispatch office, Old Man Granger sat unmoving on his stool, staring off into an unfocused middle distance.

"Here's my paperwork, sir. I filled everything out."

Granger didn't speak.

"I rinsed out the freezer wells, too. The truck's clean." Keegan resisted an urge to pass his hand in front of the old man's eyes. "Well, I got to go."

When Keegan turned back to close the door, Granger finally spoke. "Don't ever drive too fast." He could have been talking to himself. "You don't want to leave the kids behind."

It was thirty years before Keegan would drive an ice cream truck again.

The University Boulevard and Colfax Avenue enclave ended south of Cherry Creek, about fifteen blocks from Colfax. Keegan drove through the empty neighborhoods, his music turned off, the ice cream gone, and the boxes of traded goods packed securely behind him. He rested his wrists loosely over the top of the wheel, avoiding road debris with long, sweeping curves. Here the remains of homes sat back from the sidewalk on top of short, weeded slopes. The frame houses that weren't burned to the ground sagged forlornly, holes gaping in their roofs, an occasional

glass shard still clinging to a window, catching the sun. The brick homes fared better, though their roofs swooped to black holes too. Nothing worth scavenging in them now, unless there were secrets buried in their basements. Too close to University. Inside, all the drawers would be pulled out, the sheet rock rotted, wallpaper hanging in ragged folds, their owners either dead or moved to the country to raise crops.

Keegan sighed, checked the fuel gauge, and turned north. A slinky, black form, ten feet long, flowed across the road on short, powerful legs, before vanishing behind some bushes. The sun was still high in the sky. Keegan whistled. Most of the mutoids were nocturnal. He hadn't got a good look at it, but it moved like a predator. Either it had broken through the Colfax fence, or it came out of the Platte River wastes a couple of miles west. Keegan slowed the truck.

It appeared again, beside a house, placed a foot high on the worn wood, then pulled itself up. When its front paws reached the gutter, its hind feet were still on the ground. Then, without a break in rhythm, it poured onto the roof, defying gravity in its sinuous path. Before it disappeared over the peak, it looked at Keegan, small eyes buried in a broad, black skull, like a bear's. That high, poised in the sun, it no longer appeared black, but a deep, regal purple.

Back on University, two fence men pushed the barrier aside to let him through.

"Saw something big on the road back there," said Keegan.

"Like a low-riding black panther?" asked the fellow hoisting a scoped rifle.

Keegan nodded.

The man shaded his eyes to look up into the truck. "I got a shot at him yesterday, walking bold as brass in front of those shops on 6th Street. Nothing to eat in the enclave except us, so we've organized a hunting party for tomorrow. Find him and then go north for a bit. Clean out the worst of them."

"About time we went north," said the man's partner, wearing thick glasses and a cowboy hat. "The leave-them-alone-and-they'll-leave-us-alone policy sucks." He hefted his rifle, a military-issue weapon with a curved magazine. "We need as much replacement ammo as you can get us when you come next week. If we're going to clean the area out, we'll be jacking quite a few rounds."

"Tomorrow, you're hunting?" Keegan wondered if they heard the quiver in his voice.

"Couple hours before sunrise. We've got forty rifles. Figure we can make a sweep as far north as 30th Avenue. Some hotheads on the committee wanted to burn everything in that direction, but we figure a lot of the best stuff is up there."

Keegan tapped his fingers on the steering wheel. University Boulevard. stretched in front of him. The tops of trees in City Park a couple of blocks ahead waved in a breeze that didn't touch them on the street. "No need to go *beyond* the fence, is there? The majority aren't dangerous."

Rifle-scope man looked at him curiously. "Us or them, buddy."

Keegan nodded. "I'll see what I can do."

* * *

The afternoon routine was the same as always. First, he unloaded the truck in the converted bank building's garage, putting the consumables in the steel-doored storage room, then placing the rest on the shelves except for the glasses he took into his living quarters to add to his display, two rooms of ice-cream art under the lights. His favorites were ruby glass banana-split plates, casting red shadows beneath them. Then there were the tall sundae glasses, fluted sides and pouty-lipped tops. Fine ice-cream bowls of delicate china. Scoops by the dozens, some mechanical (one with a heating element for ease in carving hard-frozen treats), another of ivory, another with knuckle protectors, another with mother-of-pearl inlay in the handle. In the next room, he had the pictures: ice-cream trucks from all over the world. Psychedelic ones, and plain ones, and ones that looked like motorized tricycles, and ones shaped like cones or ice-cream men or hotdogs or popsicles. Today, though, he didn't pause to admire the collection. The men were coming!

But what could he do? He spent a couple of hours in the ice-cream room, beating eggs, adding sugar, stirring in cocoa powder and cream and vanilla. All the variations: chocolate almond, blueberry, mango sorbet, cinnamon, and a triple batch of plain vanilla. Pouring the mixture into the ice cream makers. Turning them on. His hands smelled of chocolate. The air smelled of sweet cream.

He checked the diesel generator and the diesel tanks. Finally, he made a round of the building. All doors bolted. All windows barred. The last shred of afternoon light cast lines across the bank's lobby, dust an inch thick on the counters where the tellers used to sit. His heels clicked loudly as he walked from window to window.

By the time night had fully fallen, Keegan had restocked the truck, opened the garage, and pulled onto the street. Lights off, he headed north.

He liked the city better at night. The shadows grew velvety, and reflections were soft, moonlight or starlight. At 24th Street, ten blocks north of Colfax, he turned the music on, not nearly as loud as he did during the day. In the dark, the sound seemed to carry farther. "Popeye the Sailor" he played, then "Rock-a-bye Baby."

From out of the empty houses, they came, slowly at first, and then eagerly. Some shambled. Some wobbled on uneven legs. Some trotted, their stony hoofs clicking the cement. Keegan pulled over, went to the back, opened the door above the counter, his scoops tucked into his apron.

"What'll it be?" he said to the first one.

"Chocolate," the creature croaked, its horny bill clacking together.

"What have you got for me?"

The three-fingered creature put a box of .45 caliber shells on the counter.

"Where'd you find them?" said Keegan as he swept them out of sight.

"Chocolate," it said again.

Keegan shrugged, then filled a cone. "Whatever suits you."

When the creature reached for the cone, Keegan pulled it back. "Listen," he said. "Go north tonight. It won't be safe this close to Colfax."

"Chocolate!" it snapped.

"I'm not kidding. You've got to get out of the neighborhood." Keegan pictured the scene before sunrise. The men would carry torches above their heads, watching for eye-shine in the dark. Guns would fire. The mutoids wouldn't run. Most of them didn't know better. Most of them were harmless, the warped children of warped children. Some time a couple of generations back, their parents might even have been human. Or maybe their ancestors were dogs, or sheep, or the zoo animals. Nothing bigger than a rat had bred true since Keegan had been born. There was no way to tell. Why could some of the mutoids speak? Was language passed from the ones who'd been born in human houses and then hidden? Not everyone could give up their twisted offspring so easily. Not every parent could smother a child in its sleep. "Will you go?"

Behind the creature, a line had formed. An ape-like animal with an alligator's face, its loose muscles hanging from the back of hairless arms, held a small keg that Keegan knew was full of cream. Behind it, a three-foot-tall crab with a shiny blue shell dangled a basket full of eggs from a stubby-fingered claw. Reluctantly, Keegan gave up the cone. The beast popped it into its mouth in one bite, hummed contentedly for a few seconds, then moaned as it put its hands over its forehead, eyes squeezed shut.

"I've told you that you get headaches that way," said Keegan.

The thing nodded as it staggered off.

"Don't stay home tonight," Keegan yelled

"Cinnamon-maple," said the ape, its voice a hissing lisp, when it put the keg on the counter. The heavy cream sloshed inside. Keegan didn't want to think what kind of mutoid produced it.

"The men are coming with guns," said Keegan. The ape's long fingers wrapped the bottom of the keg. He tilted his head to the side, as if thinking about Keegan's news.

The ape said, "More cream tomorrow?"

"No, not more cream. You are in danger." A thin cloud slid across the surface of the moon, darkening the street. Keegan glanced up. Dozens of mutoids crept through the houses' shadows. They were stalking him, he figured. The tyranny of the sweets. They heard the music. Most of them were small, youngsters. Were they the sentient ones, waiting for a chance to go for the ice cream? And how sentient were they? North of Colfax, the boundary between the self-aware and the purely animal blurred.

"I'll bring cream," said the ape.

Keegan bent down in frustration, resting his head on the counter.

The crab said, "They're simple people." It spoke with a slight English accent and a whir behind its voice, as if a tiny windmill nested in its throat. By standing on the tips of its delicate claws, and with a stretch of the clawed arm, it rested the basket of eggs on the counter. Once Keegan had asked it where it got the eggs. "Really old chickens," it had said.

"You'll be hunted," said Keegan. "We've got to get everyone out of here, north of 30th."

"Some might go." The crab clicked its claws together. "The smarter ones. Not many. Are you sure the men are coming? They've never come before."

Keegan nodded.

The crab's eye stalks quivered. Was that nervousness, Keegan wondered. Or was the crab laughing?

Turning north, the crab waved a claw. "It's dangerous out of our neighborhood. There are territories to consider. Borders to be crossed. Not everyone is so friendly as they are here."

"The men won't be friendly either."

"Some of us have talked about burning them out," said the crab, "but we figured if we waited long enough, they'd die on their own." It sounded meditative.

Keegan nearly dropped his scoop. "What . . . what would you do to me?" He couldn't read an expression in the crab's eyes or immobile mouth. Overhead, the cloud cleared, and, for a moment, the moon shone strongly, driving the shyest of the young mutoids back to shadows' shelter.

"You're not one of them." It clicked its claws again. "Do you have any sherbet?"

Numbly, Keegan scraped a bowl full for the crab. "Don't eat it too fast," he said out of habit.

The crab sidled away.

"You'll get them to go north?" Keegan called. "You'll warn them?"

"Those that listen."

The next mutoid plopped a box of thirty-ought-sixes on the counter. "Vanilla," it grunted. "With sprinkles."

"You have to leave," said Keegan. He shouted to the rest of them in line, to the hidden mutoids across the street. "They're coming to kill you! You have to run!"

But none of them seemed to understand. Only the crab, and he was gone. By the time Keegan scraped the last of the ice cream out of the last bin and trade goods covered the truck's floor, he was nearly weeping. It was after midnight. Within a few hours, the Colfax fence would open and the men would march through, their guns cradled, the safeties off.

Exhausted, Keegan leaned on the counter. The street was empty now, and the only movement was the subtle moon-cast edge of shadows crossing the asphalt. Somewhere in the distance a thing howled, a long yodeling ululation that ended like a baby crying.

After a long while, he pulled himself into the driver's seat, started the engine and headed home. Fifteen minutes later, the garage door lowered automatically behind him. For a moment, he considered not turning off the truck. It would be easy to leave the motor running in the closed space, to sit with his eyes shut. He could turn on the music and mix the carbon-

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monoxide sleepiness with "When the Saints Go Marching In," or "Greensleeves."

"Us or them," the man at the gate had said. "Us or them."

Keegan turned the ignition off. Mechanically, he unloaded the truck, putting the cream and eggs in the refrigerator, sorting through the ammunition, putting the other odds and ends in boxes. When he finished, he looked at the clock—2:30.

The safe thing to do would be to go to bed. He would need to move his business north. No matter how thorough the men were, they were few and the mutoids were many. They wouldn't all be wiped out. He could build a new route in the downtown area, maybe, where the broken skyscrapers crawled with life.

Or maybe he could stop the men.

Keegan opened one of the storage rooms off the garage, turned on the light, scanned the walls filled with equipment: rifles, shotguns, pistols, M-16s, bandoliers, sniper scopes, night vision goggles, gas masks, trip mines, hand grenades, Kevlar jackets, bazookas, and mortars. All trade goods that had come in the last year. Boxes of ammo reached to the ceiling. Some shells had spilled. Their brass casings caught the ceiling light. He couldn't walk without kicking them.

He picked up an M-16, turned the heavy and unwieldy thing over in his hands, and realized that he'd never fired it. Wasn't even sure if he had clips to load it.

And what good would it do? He wasn't a soldier. He couldn't kill. "Us or them," the voice said. "Us or them." Keegan could hear it in the room, quiet as a whisper.

"Which am I?" he said out loud. He smoothed his hands over his apron, sticky with the day's work. They still smelled of chocolate.

An hour's labor refilled the truck. All the ice cream he could fit. Boxes of sugar cones. Keegan checked the clock again. Almost four o'clock. They'd be at the gate by now.

Steering by moonlight, he pulled onto the street, heading north. "Row, Row, Row Your Boat," pumped out of the loudspeakers, turned loud. The first mutoid stepped from the door of a house in front of him. Keegan nodded his head, but kept rolling. Soon, another joined him, then a third. The music switched to "Song of Joy."

Keegan turned left onto 19th Street, cruising at walking speed. Doors opened. Mutoids crawled from under cars, out of manholes, from behind walls, big ones, little ones, ones that were so misshapen they were hard to look at, and still Keegan drove on, cutting back and forth through the blocks. He beat time on the steering wheel. How far could the music reach?

Old man Granger had said, "Don't ever drive too fast. You don't want to leave the kids behind." Keegan watched through the mirror. Would they keep following? By now, the street was crowded. When he reached University again, he turned north. Behind the music, did he hear a gunshot? How far back were the men?

Twelve blocks to go. Fourteen or fifteen if he wanted a cushion. At this

speed he could feel broken glass crunching under the wheels. Slowly, he passed moonlit cars' rusted-out shells, drooping road signs. A three-foot-tall mutoid with a body and head like a frog supported on a pair of slender legs trotted alongside the truck, waving a box of rifle shells.

"Keep coming," Keegan called. They rolled through the 24th Street intersection. "Song of Joy" finished. In the pause between tunes, the patter of feet sounded like rain. "It's a Small World" covered the noise. Another sharp crack from behind, then two more over the music. Definitely gunshots.

Ahead of him, a bus that had been turned on its side years ago nearly blocked the road. He steered the truck to the left to go around, over the sidewalk. A shadow stirred on top. Keegan leaned forward to look through the window.

The black creature he'd seen the day before arched its head high, its stubby front claws clasped across its chest, like a giant otter. Slowly, the truck passed the bus, within a few feet of the creature. It cocked its head to one side, as if listening to the music, and Keegan was struck again by its graceful posture, an almost regal pose with the moon-filled clouds behind it. The mutoid parade moved to the side of the houses, as far away from the beast as they could, but they kept following.

A dim reminder of gunshots rang out again. The creature looked south, then dropped to all fours before flowing off the bus, onto the street, toward Colfax Avenue, toward the men. "Don't go," Keegan whispered, but the long, black mutoid vanished into shadows.

Keegan didn't pull over until he was past 33rd Street. By the time he'd opened the counter, the crowd had gathered around. Their bodies bumped against the truck. Over their heads, Keegan saw more coming.

He wiped the counter clean. A dog-like face peered up at him, the creature's tiny, pink hands holding a screwdriver for trade. Keegan slung the rag over his shoulder. He grabbed a scoop. "What'll it be?" he said.

When the ice cream ran out, the sun was two hours into the sky, and Keegan's wrists burned. He blinked against the daylight. The last mutoids wandered off, cones in hand or paw or claw or tentacle. But he hadn't heard a gunshot for some time. He closed the counter. As he drove home, he turned on the music inside the truck only. "The More We Get Together."

Five days' straight labor replaced most of the ice cream, but Keegan was low on ingredients. It was time to head south again. He hadn't unloaded the truck since his all-nighter, and it took an hour to sort the ammunition and knick-knacks. He opened an unused storage closet to stow the overflow, mostly .22 short and longs, but also an assortment of larger calibers, several boxes of shotgun shells, and four clips of what he guessed were M-16 rounds. The mutoids were *good* at scavenging, digging deep into basements and warehouses and abandoned homes.

A dozen men, including Laird, stood at the Colfax fence as he pulled up. They slid the barrier aside to let him in.

"What's going on?" Keegan asked.

Laird rested his hand on the door. "The boys were eager to see you." He

frowned. "Seems they were pretty successful on their trip last week, and they're raring to try it again. Acquired a bit of a blood lust, I figure. Rich there is leading the posse."

Keegan stiffened as he recognized the man with the short mustache from the week before. "How successful?"

Rich joined Laird at the truck. "Not bad, harelip. Didn't get as many of the bastards as we might have liked, but we got a trophy out of it." He gestured to a tarp on the sidewalk ten feet away. A man next to the shape pulled the tarp back, revealing a broad black head and sleek neck. A chaos of flies descended on the corpse.

"Getting ripe, too," Rich added.

Keegan opened the door, stepped onto the street. The sun leaked around his sunglasses, and his eyes teared instantly. He wiped his cheeks with the side of his hand. Up close the fur really was more purple than black. Even a week dead, the creature's muscles stood out, as if with a flex of will, it could rise, throw off death's shroud, and rip them apart.

Rich said, "We need to trade for more bullets, though. Our supply is low."

Keegan touched the creature's head. Its eye was gone. Just a raw socket remained. He remembered it standing on the bus. Why had it gone toward the men? What drove it south? He smiled. There had been young mutoids then, or at least small ones. Ones he'd never seen before, like children. The truck played "Love is Blue," and "Music Box Dancer," and "Fly Me to the Moon" while he handed them ice cream. All of them gave him something. He flicked the trade goods behind him, not even looking to see what he was getting. There were so many. He'd scooped and scooped and scooped.

Rich said, "I'll bet there's a lot more of them out there, maybe more big sons of bitches like this one. Took all of us to drag him back this far."

Laird touched Keegan's shoulder. "It's an impressive specimen, isn't it? The men said it didn't even try to run. Stood in the middle of the street as if daring them to go past."

"Impressive, hell," said Rich. "It's us or them."

Keegan said, "Yeah, he's something."

Rich kicked the body. "You got more ammo, ice cream man? We've hunting to do."

The ice-cream man's back cracked when he stood. I'm getting old, he thought. The rest of the men faced him, none of them under fifty. The last of their kind. We're all getting old.

"So, what about it? How many bullets can you get for us?"

Keegan thought about the little ones running after the truck. Some of them could speak. Some just pointed at a picture of a flavor. They held their hands open, ready for their treats. He thought about the rooms full of trade goods at the bank, the shiny shells on the floor.

"Scavenging's been tough," said Keegan. "I don't think there's any ammo to be had."

As he left, he played "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" and within a block, the people came out for their ice cream. ○

SISTER LIGHT

I speak and diamonds rain
facet bright and clouded, notes
celestial, starred and snowlit skies
crescent moon on fish-scale lake
and truth: volcano's child
shout of earth, creation

remember toads
are vulnerable to sun
and even wind

and rubies bared
like pigeon's heart but not
wrest live from bloody breast
wrest, rather, from blasted ground
unfeathered, unvoiced
unbeautiful, yet bleeding

remember salamanders
swim blind in roots
and river mud

and pearls, oceanic exudation
like sweat, like spit, like tears
like pain
rocked in cradle shell
birthed and sounded
on my breath and real.

remember snakes
lead belly lives
and also die

—Holly Phillips

MARTYRS' CARNIVAL

Jay Lake

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon. He is the 2004 John W. Campbell Award winner, and a Hugo- and World-Fantasy-Award nominee. His fiction appears in markets worldwide, and he is co-editor of the *Polyphony* anthology series from Wheatland Press, as well as *All-Star Zeppelin Adventure Stories* from All-Star Stories and Wheatland Press. Jay's own story collections include *American Sorrows, Dogs in the Moon-light* and *Greetings From Lake Wu.* His first tale for *Asimov's* takes a startling look at how future societies may warp traditional beliefs almost beyond recognition.

A word of warning: there are scenes in the following tale that may be disturbing to some readers.

Good Friday

Outside the Drylands mining town of Gypsum Flats, a small crowd of people raised three titanium crosses on the windswept saltpan. From the top of the west wall, they were barely visible in the dawn's first light.

"Stupid bastards won't cut it out," growled Inspector Clarice Adkins. A spare, aging woman, she had long since rotated out of active duty in the crowded, corrupt Wetlands. Now Adkins was the sole representative of the Salton planetary government in the Syndic-controlled town. Here she had been able to hang up her weapons and spend her work nights arguing about short measures in the Commodities Exchange and rousting drunks.

Next to her on the wall, Clyde Duchien spat into his capture cup, then hooked it back onto his belt. "Everybody's got to have a hobby, I reckon."

Duchien was a grim-visaged little man, his dour face belied by an expansive soul worthy of a Wetlands merchant after a big spice deal.

Duchien was also the local Wiccan priest, inasmuch as Gypsum Flats needed one.

"Hobbies are for people who build model starships," Adkins said. The Wetlands were a teeming cesspool of spiritual eruptions, sometimes violent and often strange, that had long since exhausted her patience with cults and their precious freedoms. "This is a fecking obsession."

She stared over the hewn salt ramparts at the glaring wastes stretching west of the town to the horizon. The shadow of the town walls reached almost to the small group a few hundred meters out on the saltpan. Smart pixelbots swimming in Adkins' corneal fluid threw up rangefinding and informational graphics from CityNet. She blinked them away. This was a naked-eye situation, not the normal data-sieving that was the policeman's lot.

Duchien headed for the nearest ladder. "Then I guess we'd better get on out there and try again." He smiled up at her as he scrambled down the rungs toward the flap in the tent-like moisture barrier that covered the streets of Gypsum Flats. "Church and state, so happy together."

It was sufficiently early in the day that they didn't bother with protective gear. Adkins and Duchien walked across the gritty flats toward the busy group and their leader, Brother Little. Little was florid, rotund, wearing a black cassock with a red sash, sun hood flopping back on his shoulders. He carried a leather-bound Bible, as he always did.

"Welcome, Inspector," called Little. "I see you have come with the town Pharisee to persecute us."

Adkins sighed. Little was such a moron. Her corneal display flashed an icon for Little's citizen file, which she ignored. CityNet was too damned helpful sometimes.

"Greetings, Brother." She glanced at the three titanium crosses that Little's flock were even now cementing into the flats, a half a dozen Christians supporting each metal shaft. "You appear to be defacing the natural environment again with your rites of consensual murder." Scattered groups of triple patches in the saltpan nearby testified to previous years' congregational outings.

Little's eyes narrowed as his face flushed. "Freely exercising our religion, Inspector."

Stepping forward, Duchien reached under a woman's straining arms to rap his knuckles on the titanium of the central, tallest cross. "As I recall," he said with a smile, "it's supposed to be pine."

Brother Little sniffed. "Even the devil may quote scripture to fit his needs."

"Scripture, my ass," laughed the Wiccan. "That's commentary. Rohault de Fleury figured it out by measuring fragments of the True Cross."

"Enough, Clyde." Adkins glared at Little. "If you were using actual wood, I'd haul you in post haste." Only one species of tree grew in planet Salton's extensive equatorial Drylands, the incredibly rare pukkawood that erupted from the saltpan at phenomenal speed during the half-centimeter blackline squalls that struck once every few decades—the sole precipitation Drylands ever saw.

"It doesn't matter what my opinion of your idiotic religious practices might be. As it stands, you're merely interfering with native landforms without a permit. Despite your persistent annual violations, I've got some latitude of enforcement on this one. I suggest you take it inside the walls. Protest Square is designed for this sort of thing."

Hands on his hips, Little stood ready to fight. "So, an order interfering with our practice of religion. Persecution, just as I predicted. And what if we don't?"

Adkins glanced at the crosses. The tallest one towered about four meters, the two flanking it perhaps three meters each. "Not much I can do but give advice and enforce the law. Follow the rules, you're welcome to go to hell in your own way. Ignore me, we have a problem." She glanced at the Wiccan. "Come on, Clyde."

Duchien bowed toward the whole group. "May your springs be green. My office is open to any of you."

Adkins and Duchien walked back toward the walls of Gypsum Flats. The sun broke above the towers of the town center, while the temperature was shooting up. Most of the town would already be asleep, all but the grumbling essential services workers assigned to dayshift.

And Inspector Adkins. She was tired of dealing with the Christians and their goofy rites.

"Now what?" asked Duchien as they slipped in through West Wetlock Number Two.

"I'm going to give them an hour to think it over. Then, well . . . martyrs they want, martyrs they can have," said Adkins.

"That doesn't sound good."

"It won't be."

It was already too hot to go back onto the wall, so Adkins led Duchien to a borrowed executive office on the fourth floor of the Light Metals Trust building, the highest point in town. The room was paneled with imported gray cypress from Wetlands, and carpeted with actual woven wool. The view faced west from their vantage above the moisture barrier. The two of them sat in active contour swivel chairs, enjoying muscle massages and lime water as they watched the Christian rite in the debilitating heat far below.

"See," said Duchien. "Now he's reading scripture. They're working themselves up to the Red Martyrdom."

CityNet offered Adkins an audio feed from the nanoinstrumented mortar between the salt bricks of the walls, but she blinked it away. "Brother Little natters on about White Martyrs, Green Martyrs, Red Martyrs. I don't get it," she said. "If they're so into death, why don't they just draw Thanatol from Central Med and take the Big Nap?"

Duchien snorted. "You're right, up to a point. Any religion that promises the afterlife is better than this one automatically places death as its central obsession. This religion also absolves everyone of responsibility for self-improvement, which can be handy if you want your believers to be followers instead of thinkers. But dead sheep can only be shorn once—bad business for the pastor."

"So what about this Red Martyrdom?" Adkins waved at the view. Brother Little's congregation was in motion, one of the communicants being lifted to the left hand cross, with some apparent struggle, while two stilt walkers approached carrying hand tools.

"White Martyrs are those who surrender their possessions to serve the faith," said Duchien. "Brother Little's flock, for example. Green Martyrs take themselves into the wilderness as hermits. Not a popular option on Salton, at least not in Drylands. Red Martyrs shed blood for the faith. They sacrifice themselves in imitation of the judicial execution of their prophet. That's why Little is so invested in believing he's being persecuted—he can better identify with the origins of his cult. Helps keep the flock in line, too. It's better to have them paranoid of outside authority instead of questioning his leadership."

"Well, it's disrupting my town." Adkins glared out the window as if the force of her stare could staunch the blood already flowing from the wrists of the first Red Martyr. "Last year, Brother Little made us wait three days before we could clear the bodies. Nobody got anything done on the west side the whole time. And the year before that, he had the poor bastards dragging those metal crosses through the streets during rush hour. That caused eighty-four work-hours worth of damage to the transit guides, not to mention lost productivity across the business economy. Enough is enough."

"So?"

"I'll give them a new kind of martyrdom." She grinned. "Blue Martyrs—those who forego water for the faith. The whole congregation can fecking well sit out there until they're through with their service. Which means taking those poor bastards off those stupid crosses and tearing the things down. We'll see who believes in what after a few hours outside."

Duchien winced. "Now *that's* persecution. As your spiritual advisor, I strongly urge you to reconsider that decision."

Adkins allowed herself the pleasure of personally informing Brother Little of her new policy. As she walked back through the moisture-barriered streets to the wetlock, she opened a chatline to CityNet.

"Attention to orders."

"Recording," CityNet replied through her earbud, in its most officious voice.

"Mark all persons presently on the saltpan west of Gypsum Flats. They are in violation of planetary environmental codes regarding unlicensed tampering with native formations. None of those individuals are permitted to pass any gate or wetlock without my express override. No aid or comfort is to be given to any of them without my express override. Effective immediately."

"Logged," said CityNet. "Judicial routines request permission to review this ruling with the Syndics' Council."

Adkins snorted again. "You're too damned smart for your own good. No review, no appeal, not until further notice. On my planetary authority."

CityNet chirped wordlessly and dropped the chatline. That was as close as the system would normally come to actually arguing with her.

Since the sun was up, Adkins stopped in the ready room of West Wetlock

Number Two to grab a moisture rebreather and a heatsuit. After equipping herself, she stepped outside to watch the rest of the crucifixion process.

Perhaps an hour later, Adkins still stood in the declining sliver of shade against the west wall, her back to the gritty, wind-scoured salt bricks. Salton's glowering daystar rose behind her shoulder, a fire upon the land obliterating shadow and coolth.

Brother Little's flock rose up from their kneeling before the three crosses. Every cross bore a groaning, writhing supplicant, two men and a woman, each nude, their skin already blistering in the daylight radiation. An unprotected human could last about four hours outside in Drylands, Adkins knew, a length of time that presumed they were taking at least basic measures of self-preservation. Which in her book did not include being spiked naked to a metal cross facing the rising sun.

"Inspector Adkins," said Brother Little as he approached her. Little's face was blistered raw from the service. He'd only just flipped his sun hood up. Foolish as it was, she had to give him credit for sheer bloody-minded persistence.

"Brother Little." Adkins smiled. "Due to your failure to follow my request to dismantle this rite, you and your congregation are enjoined to stay outside the walls of Gypsum Flats until your service is completed." Adkins nodded at the crosses with their writhing, bloody payloads. "That means all paraphernalia removed from the area."

Brother Little gasped, then caught himself. "So that little weasel Duchien persuaded you to crack down on us."

"Actually, he was against the measure and appealed to me on your behalf. This is *my* decision. I'm tired of your disrupting the town every year. Take your tedious, paranoid little death cult down from its stick and bring it inside, please."

Little tapped the fingers of one hand on the Bible he clutched in the other, thinking as his congregation crowded silently around him. He finally spoke. "So you're of the opinion that my flock and I will surrender our beliefs in return for shade and water?"

"I'm counting on it," said Adkins. "Then maybe these little Passion Plays will stop. No more holes in the saltpan, no more disruption to my town. No more deaths in your congregation."

"The word is sacrifice, Inspector, not death." Brother Little turned to his followers. "Brothers and sisters," he shouted. "We will return to the crosses and pray for salvation."

As the Christians shuffled away, Brother Little looked over his shoulder. "Happy Easter, Inspector."

Adkins knew they would be back, very soon. Water had that effect on people.

Hours later, Duchien appeared in Adkins' borrowed office in the Light Metals Trust building, disheveled and gravel-voiced. "They haven't come inside the walls yet." It was around 13:00, shortly before noon.

"Been sleeping?" Adkins asked.

"Like you should be, and they. Merciful Cerridwen, it's the middle of the

day!" Duchien looked unhappy. "Brother Little's flock may be a bunch of whackos, but they have the right to *be* whackos."

"Then they can be whackos inside the town walls like everyone else," Adkins said stubbornly. "Instead of making fools of themselves out there." CityNet displayed a running total of the incapacitated along with their citizen files, despite Adkins' repeated attempts to blink the telemetry away. Fifty-four congregants, three on crosses. Two of the three "sacrifices" were at terminal exposure. The other was in critical condition, along with six congregants. Another twelve were subcritical but in need of medical intervention. None of them had yet come in to ask for water.

"There's only one fool here," Duchien said. He sounded sad. "One of *my* laws is that we do no harm. You are doing great harm, just to make a point."

Adkins almost growled. "These Christians are silly, narrow-minded killers. They nail each other to crosses in the name of love, and disrupt my town."

Duchien laughed, a bitter bark at odds with his usual humor. "Which will be considerably more disrupted this evening when the nightshift wakes up to the newscasts."

Duchien was right. By nightfall, eleven congregants were in critical condition, while all three sacrifices had died. People thronged from the wetlocks in the fading dusk, carrying virteo cameras, picnic thermoses, and all manner of trinkets. Gypsum Flats was too small to have an official Press Trust, but the community chat channels on CityNet did a wonderful job of whipping the entire town up into horrified fascination. Drylands bred boredom, so anything as unusual as Inspector Adkins' lockout of the Christians was an interesting distraction.

Adkins didn't like what she had created, but she wasn't willing to back down. "CityNet, attention to orders."

"Recording."

"Issue a general alert that there is a ten-meter exclusion zone around the congregants. Violation is a class one misdemeanor, elevated to felony at my discretion. Effective immediately. And tell those people out there to get back to work."

"Logged." said CityNet. "Is that all?"

"Smartass expert system," muttered Adkins. "Bugger off."

"Syndics' Council requests your participation in an emergency session."

"I am handling a public order crisis right now." She'd created it, actually. This circus was worse than what she had set out to stop, but Adkins had seriously expected Little's Christians to break within a few hours. Now she was committed. Her authority was at stake.

"Public order is your responsibility," said CityNet as it dropped away.

Adkins left her borrowed office just before midnight. Even though it was the middle of working hours, the Light Metals Trust was almost empty, only a few admins and managers at scattered workstations. Even the lighting was on half power. But she knew where everyone was.

Outside the walls, a carnival had erupted, celebrating the game of life and death she had set into motion. Gambling booths, used normally for the equinoctial festivals, had sprung up. Clowns tottered on stilts, spray-

ing fire from their corsages as they juggled water bladders. She smelled roasting meat, and the peppery whiff of mafu tofu. Duchien's amplified voice echoed from somewhere in the crowd, chanting Wiccan prayers.

Adkins shoved her way through, ignoring the catcalls and sarcastic questions. Her experiences with the sometimes drastic religions of Wetlands should have prepared her for this reaction from the citizens of the town—they were all Saltons. For the very first time in her career in Gypsum Flats, Adkins wished for the flechette pistol she kept racked in her office safe.

The ten-meter exclusion zone held, an irregular blob around Little's scattered congregation. CityNet must be busy over the chatlines warning people off because the crowd pushed up against the invisible line, especially on the east side of the zone, toward town and the carnival. The west side of the zone was dark, a few people ghosting by in the reflected firelight from the east—kids skylarking, lovers trysting, amateur astronomers stargazing. Adkins crossed the invisible line of exclusion, heading for Brother Little's kneeling bulk.

"Hey, felon!" someone yelled at her. A *portugale* fruit bounced off her shoulder to roll to a stop between the congregants, some of whom still knelt in prayer. Others had collapsed. Adkins had taken to ignoring CityNet's status reports on the Christians. She now ignored the taunts as she approached Brother Little.

Little was reciting, presumably Christian scripture. "He is swift as the waters, their portion is cursed in the earth, he beholdeth not the way of the vineyards. Drought and heat consume the snow waters, so doth the grave those which have sinned." Sighing, Brother Little stopped. Without turning around, he said, "This is the Word of the Lord, Book of Job. Greetings, Inspector."

"Are you satisfied?" Adkins demanded.

"And ye shall take no satisfaction for him that is fled to the city of his refuge, that he should come again to dwell in the land, until the death of the priest." Little's voice was hoarse, cracked by the heat. "Numbers Thirty-Five, verse Thirty-Two."

She had to find a way out of this. "I'll take that as a 'no.'"

Still not turning to face her, Brother Little chuckled. "Our God is a great God, Inspector, even here in the valley of the shadow of death. Especially here."

Adkins glanced up at the crosses with their dead. "You're the killers here. I just want you to stop."

"By burning us out? Believe me, it's been tried before. No, since you won't let us back into Gypsum Flats, I think we'll stay where we are for the three days of our Easter service."

"Even with sun hoods and heatsuits, most of you won't last two more days out here unprotected."

"The Lord provides." He sighed. "Some of us will be Red Martyrs for the faith. Some of us will return within the walls, stronger than ever. That carnival back there is a testament to our power. Tell me, did they cheer you when you walked among them?"

Adkins remember the thrown *portugale,* the catcalls. This wasn't why she had come to Gypsum Flats. The violence, corruption, and venal disinterest of the great Wetlands cities had, in the end, disgusted her. "I was

wrong, Brother Little. You may come back inside the walls." She blinked open a chatline. "CityNet, attention to orders. Restrictions on reentry of the Christians to town are lifted."

"Recorded and logged," said CityNet. Brother Little did not stir, still staring up at his dead on their crosses.

"You should come in," said Adkins. "Please."

"I think not. You have reminded us of the challenge and power of our faith. We shall worship here until Easter Sunday and see what rises up."

Adkins kicked a little spray of salt in her frustration, then walked back through the scattered congregants toward the carnival.

CityNet warbled in her ear. "Do you wish to lift the exclusion zone as well?"

"No," Adkins said shortly, her anger renewed. "They want to rot out here, let them rot without help from anybody else. Little's people heard me, they know they can come in any time they want."

"You may wish to know that the Syndics' Council has declared a three-day holiday effective tonight. Syndic Martel of the Water Trust enjoined me to report that he said, 'Do we not certainly know that every bottle shall be filled with wine?'"

Adkins shoved through a line of masked dancers, the smells of joss and ganja almost overwhelming. "What the feck does that mean?"

"They know a party when they see it, and won't try to fight it."

An all-town party to celebrate her Blue Martyrs. Wonderful.

Holy Saturday

By noon, seven of the congregants had died, in addition to the original three Red Martyrs. Nineteen more were critical.

Adkins stood in her borrowed Light Metals Trust office and stared across the glaring flats to where Brother Little's congregation still knelt. The carnival had packed up with the dawn, leaving few scars of its passage, except for the huge lettering that someone had painted on the saltpan just outside the ten-meter exclusion zone. It read, "BLUE MARTYRS LIVE."

She watched a single figure stumble out toward the Christians, dressed only in street robes—no sun hood, no heatsuit. The person towed a child's wagon loaded with water bladders. A closet Christian perhaps, gone to join their brethren in Blue Martyrdom.

"CityNet, who's that out there?"

CityNet threw up telemetry and rangefinding data in her field of vision, along with a citizen record icon. She paged into it.

Duchien. Out in the noonday sun without any protection.

"Oh, Clyde," she whispered. "You idiot."

She knew exactly to whom the Wiccan was ministering. He was ministering to her.

Adkins ignored CityNet's request for confirmation of her exclusion order. Instead, she watched Duchien stumble in the heat, carrying his water bladders from Christian to Christian. One by one, they refused him.

When Clyde finally fell to his knees and covered his face, shoulders

shaking, in front of the crosses, she felt stinging tears gather in her own eyes. Adkins turned on her heel and left the Light Metals Trust, heading for her own office in the basement of the Syndics' Hall, the safe within, and her long-neglected flechette pistol.

Late that evening, Adkins still hadn't left her office. The safe door stood open, and she had field-stripped the flechette pistol at least a dozen times. At the moment, it lay disassembled on her desk, the ceramic salt-shaker muzzle pointing toward the ceiling, next to the inductor, the feed chamber, and the power pack.

As she cleaned the pistol, Adkins paged through some of the citizen files on the Christians dying outside. The sacrifices first.

Marj Delahunt, three children lost in the Seventeen-Delta mine gallery collapse last year, alcoholic husband that Adkins had taken in twice for domestic assault.

Li-Peng Kaufmann, off heroin for four years since joining Brother Little's flock.

Rory Ellis, on the tallest cross, with the congregation six years. His sister had been executed the previous month down in Wetlands by the Syndics' Bench in Bohemian Grove for trafficking in unlicensed economics and history texts. Ellis's mother had taken Thanatol a week later.

The rest of the worshippers were people just like the sacrifices, people Brother Little had helped out of pain and personal ruin. People that Clyde Duchien cared about.

People that were dying because of her.

Adkins gave up on detailing the weapon's frame with a wire brush and machine oil and stared at the wall, trying to think of anything but Duchien. Since she'd come down to her office, CityNet had ignored her. The Syndics' Council had ignored her. Even the drunks in the street had ignored her. Adkins hadn't gotten a call in the last eleven hours, which had to be a new record. Apparently the entire town of Gypsum Flats was out at the second night of the Martyrs' Carnival.

She ate another water cracker and picked up the wire brush again. As she worked, CityNet bleeped an intermediate priority override. Satellite data wrote itself in her eyes as the system spoke. "Blackline squall developing to the southeast."

"Hmm." She scrubbed the creases in the inductor mounting nubs.

"There is a 60 percent chance it will pass over Gypsum Flats between 09:00 hours and 13:11 hours local noon tomorrow. Gypsum Flats will experience trace precipitation, with a low probability of rising to measurable levels."

"And a fecking good thing that is," she said, "since half the buildings in this town are made of salt slabs."

"There are fourteen dead outside the walls."

"That will be all, CityNet."

"Clyde Duchien is in critical condition. Central Med estimates his tolerance for additional direct sun exposure at zero."

"Shut up!" Adkins screamed. She hurled the wire brush across the room. After taking several deep breaths, she snapped the flechette pistol together, powered it up, and left her office.

Easter Sunday

By the time Adkins got through the wetlock, it was just past midnight. The Martyrs' Carnival was in full swing, but tonight it had a different, raw sound. There was less dancing, more shouting. Most of the gambling booths were gone. Adkins saw posters of Duchien and Little for sale, and people drawing down on images of her with air rifles in one of the few games still being played. Even the food smelled harsher.

And no one acknowledged her. Not even with catcalls. The crowds simply melted away from her in glowering silence, her own private exclusion zone. Adkins kept one hand on the butt of her flechette pistol and walked straight through the carnival to the congregation.

To an individual, they all slumped in the darkness, even Brother Little. Adkins walked among them as the sounds of the carnival died behind her. She didn't turn to look, but she knew that most of town was watching her. She picked her way to Duchien, stretched out next to his silly wagon.

One by one, she unloaded the water bladders, stacking them by Brother Little's side. Even in the dim light reflected from the carnival, she could see Little's face was a bloody mass, his breathing harsh and irregular. Then Adkins gathered Duchien up and laid him across the wagon. The Wiccan's arms and legs splayed as if he were already a corpse, but she could hear his ragged breathing, too.

One hand on her pistol, the other on the handle of the wagon, Adkins faced the hostile crowd ringing the exclusion zone and towed Duchien back toward town.

This time they did not melt away. She walked until she had to stop, less than a meter from a line of men, women, and children, some wearing masks, some with painted faces, some merely grim.

"I need to take him to Central Med," Adkins said quietly. "He will die." She could die here, too, at the hands of this crowd. Like a metastable solution, it awaited only the slightest tap to crystallize into violence. "Rain is coming," she whispered. "The Blue Martyrs have prayed for rain and it comes."

Then the crowd parted for her, filtering backward like a trickle of sand. She pressed inward, this time passing so close to people she might as well have been in a tunnel. The wagon began to jerk in her hand. She glanced back to see people touching Duchien, reaching out to brush him—not an attack, just an acknowledgement. The blessing of a martyr.

When the first person in the crowd spat on her, she couldn't believe it. No one in Drylands wasted their body's water like that. Then the spittle became a rain, drenching Adkins' hair and face and shoulders. As she approached the wetlock, the party resumed behind her.

One by one, Adkins went back for the eleven dead that she could reach, paging through their citizen files as she loaded them on the wagon and took them to Central Med. She could do nothing for the Red Martyrs on their crosses. Except for whoever snatched her flechette pistol from its holster on her third trip, the revelers ignored Adkins completely.

Dawn brought the wind—crackling, electric, carrying the water scent

that only came with a blackline squall. Adkins stood on the town walls, still wearing her empty holster. She watched the last of the carnival break down under the impending threat of sunlight. Beyond them, the three crosses towered, Brother Little's scattered congregation slumped around them. Not one of the Christians had come in on their own.

Brainwashed sheep!

The wind gusted, its strength and distinctive scent scaling upward. Being an immigrant, Adkins had never smelled the squall except in sims. They came only once every decade or two.

"CityNet," Adkins whispered. "The storm is early."

"Weather Services says this is a large blackline squall. A wet low-pressure front broke through the standing high-pressure trough at the Gagarin Range."

Filtered through the squall, the sunlight scattered on the saltpan was muted, colored differently than she had ever seen it since coming to Drylands. She didn't bother to go for a heatsuit or a sun hood, but stood on the walls waiting for the storm.

Lightning reaved Gypsum Flats. Directly above Adkins, the sky was mottled bruise-dark. Further west, it was the same pale blue as always, and, looking back across the moisture barriers between the buildings, the east was blue. Sparks showered from a destroyed lightning rod as a spray of building salt blew off the roof of the Water Trust. Adkins' visual display flickered wildly, while her earbud buzzed with static. CityNet had dropped all the chatlines.

She turned to face the three crosses as lightning danced across the ground, grazing the crosses in passing. The saltpan was shattered where the bolts struck, smoking slightly in their passing both around the crosses and elsewhere. Then the rain began, drops the size of peas hammering like bullets, mixed with hailstones that cracked the surface of the salt block walkway on which Adkins stood.

People streamed into the streets, shouting, screaming, singing, as they raced for the wall. Rain had not fallen over Gypsum Flats for two decades, and they would make the most of it. Below Adkins, people shoved out of the wetlock to dance on the saltpan under the water falling hard from the sky. Some ran toward the crosses and the dying Christians.

The whole city was celebrating Brother Little's miracle come to pass, rain sent by his God for the Blue Martyrs. "It's just fecking *weather*," Adkins muttered to herself as she raced down the ladder to shove her way through the crowds to the nearest wetlock.

Four minutes later, she was outside. The rain still hammered down, hail bloodying people's faces. The town walls ran with slushy rivulets of salt as rain attacked the bricks. Even the saltpan had become slick. Adkins scrambled across it, desperate to reach Brother Little.

As Adkins dodged through the congregation to approach the crosses, another lightning bolt struck. This one triple-forked, blazing down on all three of them. The Red Martyrs danced as their bodies smoked, one of them slumping partway free from his crucifixion. Then the ground shook,

the lightning cracks in the saltpan widening around the base of each cross. Green tentacles lashed up out of the cracks, waving wildly as they unfolded fans to catch the rain.

Adkins skidded to a halt, losing her balance to fall backward painfully on her elbows. A few of the Christians groaned, rolling over to face the water from the sky as townsmen gathered around. More green tentacles shot from the ground, thin as whips, wrapping themselves around the three titanium crosses.

The crosses lurched as the whip-thin tentacles thickened, then broadened, green skin splitting to bark. Similar shoots popped out of cracks around the crosses, including one right in front of Adkins' feet.

Two minutes later, it was done. The blackline squall passed off to the west, leaving three pukkawood trees each standing eight meters tall, intertwined with the metal crosses. In the distance, staggered lines of other pukkawoods rose, each from a crack riven into the saltpan by the advancing lightning. Seedpods burst open with tiny, feathered hopes that flew away on the wind to wait across the years for the next rain.

The three Red Martyrs were gone, their biomass fueling the pukkawoods' frantic growth. Adkins could see the bones of a hand protruding from one of the trees, but that was all.

Beside her, Brother Little struggled to his knees. He placed one hand on the water bladders Duchien had left out the day before, then turned to face Inspector Adkins. Little's eyes were crusted shut by bloody, swollen skin, but he squinted until he could see her.

"uh 'ord 'robi'es," he croaked, before collapsing.

"The Lord provides," echoed CityNet in her earbud.

The citizens of Gypsum Flats swirled around her, picking up the dead and dying Christians and carrying them back behind the walls to Med Central. Brother Little was whisked away by two men in Syndics' robes, although she didn't bother to look at their faces. Adkins just stood there, staring at the three nearest pukkawood trees as the feather seeds swirled around her like salt on the breeze.

It was lightning, racing before the storm to break the saltpan's surface, she told herself, *lighting that had been drawn to the metal crosses.* The breaks in the saltpan exposed the waiting pukkawood seeds so that they could receive the elusive rain. A well-documented part of the cycle of life here in Salton's Drylands.

Ecology, not theology.

If there had been a miracle, it was a miracle of faith, not divine intervention. Little's God was no more, or less, real than Duchien's Cerridwen. Adkins *knew* that, sure as she knew she would draw her next breath.

With a sigh, she turned her back on the pukkawood trees and trudged back to the walls. Inside the town, the Martyrs' Carnival was a near-riot. People danced naked with their faces and bodies painted blue, crowns of thorns upon their heads. Someone in these crowded streets had her pistol, and Adkins aimed to find him.

Miracle or no miracle, public order must be preserved. The law was her faith, the daily workings of Gypsum Flats her miracle.

She pushed through the writhing bodies, looking for a man with a gun. ○

Kage Baker is currently working on a story for Jack Dann and Gardner Dozois's forthcoming young adult anthology, *Young Spacemen* (Science Fiction Book Club). Her next novel, *The Children of the Company,* will be out from Tor sometime this fall. In her latest tale for *Asimov's,* she revisits one of our favorite characters, Alec Checkerfield, and gives new meaning to the reprimand . . .

BAD MACHINE

Kage Baker

Alec Checkerfield, like other members of the administrative class, was enrolled in a Circle of Thirty when he was eleven. This was intended to forge lasting bonds with his fellow junior aristocrats, embedding him firmly in the social stratum he would occupy during his adult life.

The experiment was not a notable success. By the time he was sixteen, he had managed to alienate nearly half of those with whom he was meant to row the great galley of the state through mid-century.

Alec was not a bully, nor was he ambitious for power, nor was he given to unpopular political views. He was pleasant, polite and noncompetitive, exactly as a model citizen ought to be.

However, he *was* large.

And talented.

"The Ape Man's at it again," said Alistair Stede-Windsor in disgust. Elvis Churchill and Musgrave Halliwell-Blair turned to look, with identical expressions of loathing on their patrician young faces.

The object of their concerted ill-will sat some distance away, under the great plane tree that shaded the Designated Youth Zone. He appeared to be telling a story, in quite unnecessarily musical tones, to four girls who sat around him. They appeared to be enthralled.

"Don't they realize what he's doing?" muttered Halliwell-Blair.

"Look at that hypocritical smile," said Stede-Windsor. "You know why

he smiles with his lips closed like that, don't you? It's to hide those ghastly long teeth."

"I'm positive he's some kind of genetic freak," said Churchill. "Seriously. I wonder . . . ought we to make a discreet call to the Reproduction Board?"

"What, to have him tested? See whether he's some kind of degenerate throwback? Or mutation?" said Stede-Windsor, brightening.

There was a thoughtful silence, broken by Halliwell-Blair saying: "No good, gentlemen. I've already investigated his bloodlines. The Honorable Cecelia Ashcroft-Checkerfield actually passed a genetic screening test. Voluntarily. And the sixth earl is tall, too."

"What a pity," said Churchill. "No chance we could get him on abnormal psychology? He's clearly a sexual obsessive."

"Obviously," said Stede-Windsor.

Alec Checkerfield concluded his tale, and the girls shrieked with appreciative laughter at its punchline. Beatrice Louise Jagger leaned forward, especially her chest, and said something breathless and sincere to Alec. He smiled at her and took her hand. Raising it to his lips, he inhaled appreciatively before kissing it.

The three young gentlemen flinched.

"Oh, I'm going to puke!" cried Stede-Windsor.

"Disgusting," said Churchill.

"*Trite*," said Halliwell-Blair. "If only they could see themselves!"

"He's a filthy . . ." Stede-Windsor sought for an ancient pejorative. "He's a lounge lizard, that's what he is!"

Alec Checkerfield relinquished Beatrice Louise Jagger's hand, smiling at her with eyes blue as high tide on a Caribbean beach. So pleasant was his expression that the slight oddness of his features might be missed, by any scrutiny less hostile than Halliwell-Blair's. If his pale eyes were smaller, if his cheekbones were higher, if his mouth was wider than the norm—why, he was only a horse-faced young man, wasn't he?

Jill Courtenay said something witty, and Alec shouted with laughter. In that moment of spontaneous mirth, his teeth were briefly visible and they were certainly long, and white, and rather sharp-looking.

The onlookers shuddered.

"Not a lounge lizard, exactly," amended Stede-Windsor. "More of a lounge tyrannosaur."

The young gentlemen need not have concerned themselves. They were, after all, untried amateurs. Others existed who were far better at protecting public health and morals.

Mr. Elrond Frist was one of these. His life's work was tedious, but desperately important, and he was devoted to it. He it was who tracked the sales of certain retail items for the Bureau of Public Health, and his beat covered the whole of metropolitan London. When sales of any one of the goods he monitored reached a certain level, he duly informed his superiors. Certain steps were then taken or not taken, depending on the circumstances.

Today he stared, unbelieving, at sales figures for Happihealthy Shields.

They had been climbing steadily for the last six months. Respectable

sales were desirable, for every registered sexually active citizen had a duty to use Happihealthies. When the total number of Happihealthies sold exceeded the number of registered sexually active citizens by a ratio of fifteen to one, however, something was terribly *wrong* in metropolitan London.

Trembling, Mr. Frist rose and went to his communications console. He rang a certain commcode.

"Mr. Peekskyll," he said, "I think you'd better see something."

Mr. Sandbanks Peekskyll had been granted certain powers by the state, because his stability and his good judgment were considered to be beyond question. If his stability and good judgment were not quite what the state assumed them to be, nevertheless he saw a great deal through those pinpoint pupils of his, and discharged his duties with zeal and efficiency.

Mr. Peekskyll had been *cyborged;* which is to say, he had had himself adapted for direct interface with the government's database, through the installation of a small port in the back of his head. As long as its connector plug was removed at night and sterilized on a daily basis, he suffered no health problems, and as long as he kept his hat on, no one had any reason to object to his appearance.

He mused now over the figures Mr. Frist had sent him.

After a moment he thought in a request. Within seconds he had what he had asked for: a list of all suppliers of Happihealthies in London, with attendant sales figures for the last month. Some shops reported normal sales figures; others reported unusually high turnover. Mr. Peekskyll drummed his fingers on the console a moment before thinking in another request.

The screen before him displayed a map of London, with the locations of all shops in question highlighted in varying shades of red, the intensity of the color corresponding to the number of packets sold.

There appeared to be a series of concentric circles radiating from one block in Bloomsbury, sedate pink along the edges but blazing scarlet toward its center.

Mr. Peekskyll exhaled sharply. With another request he had the names of every resident within the defined area. He narrowed his eyes, and decided to play a hunch. He went straight to Happihealthy Incorporated's database, pulling up their mail order figures. One more command got him the shipping addresses for all orders. He found one for an address in Bloomsbury. Six orders had been shipped in the last year.

Satisfied that he had done his job, Mr. Peekskyll rang his superior.

"Mr. Buddy-Wires? Something of interest here," he said.

Mr. Evel Buddy-Wires ran an empire of his very own. He took steps that needed to be taken. He liked his job a great deal. He hadn't purchased a packet of Happihealthies in twenty years. He didn't need them.

"Roger Checkerfield," he said thoughtfully. "Sixth earl of Finsbury, eh? I can't say I'm surprised. He's a thoroughgoing degenerate. Record of sub-

stance abuse and no sense of duty at all. Repeatedly fined for failing to attend Parliament."

"With respect, sir," said Mr. Peekskyll. "The charges have been made to his credit account, but the, er, merchandise hasn't been shipped to him. He's living on a yacht in the Caribbean."

"So he is," said Mr. Buddy-Wires, glancing at the screen. "But then who, in his London home, is buying such an obscene number of Happihealthies?"

Mr. Peekskyll cleared his throat.

"Our records list three persons resident at that address," he said. "Malcolm Lewin, age ninety-six, member of the household staff. Florence Lewin, age ninety-eight, also member of the household staff. Married couple, but they haven't registered as sexually active in decades."

"I should think not," said Mr. Buddy-Wires in distaste. "And the third member of the household?"

"Alec William St. James Thorne Checkerfield, age sixteen," said Mr. Peekskyll.

"*Ah.*"

"Who, being underage, is of course not registered either."

"Of course." Mr. Buddy-Wires smiled, feeling a warm glow inside. He leaned back from his console and steepled his fingers.

"Shall I alert the Public Health Monitors, sir?" Mr. Peekskyll inquired.

"No, no, not just yet. We want to investigate further," replied Mr. Buddy-Wires. "Little Alec seems to be a very naughty boy, but let's be sure."

"He can't actually be using them himself," said Mr. Peekskyll. "No one could use that many! He must be selling them to other minors, illegally."

"Undoubtedly. Delinquent himself and contributing to the corruption of other children? I really fear it's Hospital for our young friend," said Mr. Buddy-Wires with relish.

"I would think we'll need an airtight case, then," said Mr. Peekskyll. "What with him being peerage. Lord Finsbury's sure to appeal any diagnosis."

"I hope to take down Lord Finsbury as well," said Mr. Buddy-Wires. His smile just kept getting wider. "In fact, particularly. A case can be made that this is his fault, after all! See what's come of his deplorable lifestyle? What kind of man leaves his offspring in the care of a senile butler and cook for years on end? If he'd stayed home like a responsible citizen, he might have exercised some paternal influence."

The truth was that Alec had had quite a lot of paternal influence, though not from Roger Checkerfield. Malcolm Lewin, who was not at all senile, had provided the boy with some guidance. However, Alec's main role model and advisor was even now tapped in to Mr. Buddy-Wires' communications console, listening to every word spoken in the room. And he was as alarmed, and as grimly angry, as a machine can be.

It was universally acknowledged that artificial intelligences were incapable of experiencing real emotion. If it were for one moment supposed otherwise, there would be no end to the cry for machine suffrage; and in a world where first women, and then foreigners, and at last even animals

had been granted the right to the pursuit of happiness, this last line must be drawn in the sand, lest the world descend into rank animism.

So it was argued that the complex system of electromagnetic reactions that gave a machine the *analogue* of emotion—the elaborate programming that created the illusions of satisfaction or need, to enable it to function properly—was nothing whatever like the complex system of chemical reactions that motivated an organic being.

Nevertheless, Captain Morgan was swearing to himself now, and using language that would make any organic blanch, too.

When Roger Checkerfield's credit account had been examined, silent alarms had sounded in Bloomsbury. From that moment the captain's attention had been drawn from his usual pastime of monitoring Alec through the network of surveillance cameras throughout London. He had continued to watch over his boy with one eye, as it were; but he had also extended his observation to the consoles used by Mr. Peekskyll and Mr. Buddy-Wires, as well as their in-office surveillance cameras.

Hell and damnation, the captain thought to himself. *There just ain't no rest for the wicked, is there, now?*

He defined himself as *wicked* because he was a pirate. He was a pirate because five-year-old Alec had liked pirates, and had (against all probability and incidentally the law too) therefore reprogrammed his Pembroke Playfriend unit to reflect his personal tastes. Though the captain's customized abilities had increased in a manner that would have appalled his original designers at Pembroke Technologies, his core programming remained unchanged: to protect and nurture Alec Checkerfield. And the captain was now the most powerful artificial intelligence in London.

The captain watched intently, baring his metaphorical teeth as Mr. Buddy-Wires dismissed Mr. Peekskyll and squeezed in a few inquiries on the medical and academic history of Alec William St. James Thorne Checkerfield.

What a nosy lubber it is, to be sure . . . I reckon countermeasures is called for, aye.

"It's just a word," said Alec. "It can't hurt you. Or anybody! Just a word to describe a perfectly normal, natural, beautiful, er, expression of love between two people, okay?" He had a warm, golden sort of voice, and was speaking with all the suavity he could muster.

"Okay," said the Honorable Sophia Fitzroy, breathing heavily. She had retreated with him to the relative privacy behind the Designated Youth Zone's garden shed.

"Okay. Now, here's another word," said Alec, and said one. "And all *that* is, is a part of your body. A really beautiful part, which is, after all, the whole source of life and everything. Right?"

"Right," said the Honorable Sophia Fitzroy, appalled but also rather thrilled.

"Right. So it's nothing to be ashamed of at all, wouldn't you have to agree?"

"I guess so," said the Honorable Sophia Fitzroy, thinking of the brief

hesitant fumblings of Colin Debenham and Alistair Stede-Windsor, who had seemed terribly ashamed.

"I mean, if you look at the exhibits in the British Museum, you'll see 'em everywhere," said Alec earnestly, gazing deep into her eyes. "And nobody thinks that's wrong. And, you know what else you see in the British Museum?"

"What?"

Alec said another word. It was a plural noun. the Honorable Sophia Fitzroy gaped.

"You never!"

"You do, though," said Alec. "There's all these statues have 'em large as life. Well, almost as large as life. Now, see, you're turning red, and that's so sad, really, because it's only another word, isn't it? And what's wrong with it, if you just listen?" He repeated the word, as a singular noun now. He repeated it several times, in differing intonations: brightly, solemnly, prayerfully, humorously.

The Honorable Sophia Fitzroy began to giggle. So far, Alec was living up to his reputation.

"See? I feel absolutely no embarrassment about it," said Alec. "And why should I? It's only a word to describe a part of *my* body. So it's cool."

The Honorable Sophia Fitzroy said the word, in an experimental way, and blushed.

"There, you see?" exclaimed Alec, blushing too. "Nothing wrong with it at all. And without it there wouldn't be any sexual love, which is the most beautiful experience two people can have together. Isn't it?"

"Well, except for catching diseases and babies and things," said the Honorable Sophia Fitzroy.

"Ah! Well, that was true in the old days, when people didn't know any better," said Alec. "But, of course, we've got *these* now!"

He drew from his pocket a Happihealthy, and held it up with a triumphant smile. Every boy in the Circle of Thirty carried a Happihealthy on his person at all times. After the first few months a Happihealthy began to look rather sad, its cheery little wrapper crumpled and squashed from prolonged contact with the inside of a boy's pocket, gummed with lint and crumbs and other things best not mentioned. Sometimes, after years of fruitless anticipation, a Happihealthy might even split its wrapper and expire with a vacuum-packed sigh, like a spinster aunt at a wedding.

Alec's Happihealthy, however, was bright and fresh and eager-looking, for it had been slipped into his pocket only that morning.

The Honorable Sophia Fitzroy cast a furtive glance at the nearest surveillance camera. "But they can see us," she whispered.

"Not here," said Alec. "That one's got a half-hour sweep cycle. It turned away just before we went in here. And the one across the way is switched off for repair."

"And you can really. . . ?"

"All the time," said Alec proudly. "Want to see?"

The Honorable Sophia Fitzroy bit her lower lip.

"I'm desperately curious," she admitted.

"No gentleman leaves a lady desperate," said Alec. Leaning forward, he took her face in his hands, very gently, and kissed her. She made a surprised sound:

Five minutes later she was making greedy sounds.

Ten minutes later she was walking from behind the shed, slightly unsteady, with very wide eyes. After a discreet pause Alec followed her, hands in his pockets. He caught up with The Honorable Sophia Fitzroy and steered her to a fruit ice cart, where he gallantly bought her a Cherry Bingo.

And though nobody had seen them enter or leave the space behind the shed, something was in the air. Alistair Stede-Windsor, Elvis Churchill, Musgrave Halliwell-Blair, Colin Debenham, Hugh Rothschild, Dennis Neville, Edgar Shotts-Morecambe, and a few others sensed it, and glared at Alec the rest of the day. Strutting, he ignored them.

The Honorable Sophia Fitzroy spent the rest of the day in close and hushed conversation with a small circle of friends. Occasionally they could be heard to giggle.

Alec ran up the steps to his room two at a time, removing his tie as he went. He swaggered through the doorway, whirling his tie about his head.

"Permission to come on board, Captain sir!" he yelled gleefully, flinging himself into a chair.

From its corner up near the ceiling, a Maldecena projector pivoted and extended an arm; a beam of light shot forth, and a second later Captain Morgan materialized, looming before Alec in hologram.

He no longer appeared wearing the scarlet coat and cocked hat little Alec had given him long ago; these days he took the form of a large and rather threatening-looking man in a three-piece-suit. His hair and wild beard were as black as the Jolly Roger, however, and he was still prone to draw a cutlass from midair in the heat of argument.

"Alec, we got to have a parley," he said sternly.

"Fire away," said Alec, sticking out one long leg and pushing off from the wall so his chair skated backward.

"You been having at the wenches again, ain't you, boy?"

"Er—" Alec looked up into the captain's eyes, which were just at this moment the color of the North Sea in a storm. He considered lying, very briefly, and then said, "Yeah. But not anywhere near the Coastal Patrol, like you told me," in a small voice.

"What else did I tell you, you damn fool?" the captain roared.

"Always use Happihealthies," said Alec. "And I have been."

"Happihealthies, aye. And considering I ordered you a whole bloody case what was supposed to last you till you come of age, would you mind telling me why you been buying 'em at every goddamned chemist's within a five-mile radius?"

"Oh," said Alec. "I, er, needed more. But I've been really sneaky, Captain! I never buy 'em at the same shop twice, see? So nobody suspects."

The captain rolled his eyes. Alec, regaining a little of his composure, grinned shamefacedly. "Anyway, it's in aid of a humanitarian cause. You

know what I found out today, Captain? Out of all the guys in Circle, I'm the only one who can—er—"

"Fire a broadside?"

"Yup!" Alec flung up his fists like a victorious athlete. "Boom, boom, boom! Sophia told me I'm a, what was her phrase? A fantastic monster prodigy. Mr. Twenty-four/Seven. Alistair Stede-Windsor can't. Dennis Neville can't. Just meeeee!"

He leaped from his chair and did a suggestive dance of triumph in the center of the room. The captain's cameras swiveled to follow him, as the captain scowled.

"Listen to me, son," he said. "This ain't safe."

"Of course it's safe," said Alec. "I always use Happihealthies, okay? And I always send the surveillance cameras a fake signal, so the Public Health Monitors won't have a clue—"

"Which is why *I* ain't had no inkling either, ain't it?" the captain growled.

"Yeah, well, okay, sorry. And we're always really careful about anybody else seeing. And none of the girls are going to talk! They love me. I love them. Terrifically well. Maybe I'll have a badge printed up. 'Checkerfield Satisfies!' Or post a notice on the news kiosk," babbled Alec, aware he had overstepped the mark and deciding he may as well make a thorough job of it.

"You ain't doing no such thing, by thunder!" said the captain. "Bloody hell, boy, ain't I told you what could happen? Do you *want* to spend the rest of yer life in Hospital?"

"Of course not," said Alec. "A-and I'm going to see to it that I don't."

"You'll see to it, says you? Haar. Yer smart as paint, buck, but you ain't going to outfox the Bureau of Public Health for long. You listen, now! Sooner or later one of them little wenches is going to talk."

"They'd never," Alec protested.

"Oh, hell no, everybody knows teenaged girls never gossips. *They're* silent as bloody nuns in a convent," snarled the captain. "And what d'you reckon all them boys in Circle is going to do, if word gets out you been playing stallion?" he demanded. Alec went a little pale.

"Die of envy?" he said defiantly.

"One anonymous call, that's all it'd take!" said the captain. "And there'd be six Public Health Monitors on the doorstep afore you could sneeze, boy, with gas guns and a van to cart you off in."

Alec clenched his fists. "This is too shracking unfair," he shouted. "Here I am having the best time I've ever had in my life, and I'm not hurting anybody, and where's the harm? You always told me it was all right to think about this stuff. Well, I need to do more than think! I like the way girls smell, and taste, and feel, and—and do you realize nobody'd even touched me since I was five years old, until I took up sex? People *love* me!"

"Son, this ain't love," said the captain.

"How the hell would you know?" said Alec. "You're only a machine, how can you expect to understand what I'm going through?"

The captain sighed.

"I'm only the machine what's programmed to keep you safe, son. Same as I been since you was five years old. And yer all of sixteen now, ain't

that what you was about to say? But I ain't no bleeding Puff the Imaginary Magic Dragon neither, lad. I ain't fading away and letting my boy run himself on a reef when he still needs a helmsman. Not my little Alec, what set me free of the old Playfriend."

"It *is* love," said Alec stubbornly, staring at the floor. "They do love me. This isn't just about sex. They're wonderful people. I was supposed to make friends in my Circle of Thirty, wasn't I? Well, I have. They just happen to be girls. What's wrong with that?"

The captain considered Alec for a long moment. If he had not been a machine, he might have lost his temper and told Alec the real reason the boy had to avoid drawing attention to himself at any cost. As it was, he held his metaphorical tongue and, with the swiftness and pragmatism of a machine—or a buccaneer—made a decision.

"Well, matey, I reckon yer right," he said. "Yer the organic, after all, and what would a poor old machine like me know about love and hormones? But let's sign articles, Alec. No more buying prophylactics down the corner shop, boy, understand? Too risky. You let your old captain order 'em. I can do it without drawing attention."

"Okay," said Alec. He raised his eyes. "And . . . I'm sorry. About calling you a machine."

"Why lad, it's true, ain't it?" The captain grinned, with the perfect illusion of white teeth. "Best you'd get on with your lessons, now. I'll just go below and see to a few things."

Mr. Buddy-Wires studied the medical records for Alec William St. James Thorne Checkerfield. He was frowning, tapping his front teeth with a stylus as he read, and quite unaware that he was being monitored by an intelligence housed in a cabinet in Bloomsbury.

Nothing unusual in the boy's history, other than the fact that he had been born at sea on the sixth earl's yacht instead of in a proper medical facility. And he hadn't been brought home to England until the age of four, so all his early care—inoculations, brain scans, genetic tagging—had been done in foreign facilities and was therefore almost certain to have been slipshod and perfunctory.

Possibly even faked? Everyone knew these Third World physicians accepted bribes. And Roger Checkerfield might well have had something to hide.

It was a crime, to Mr. Buddy-Wires' way of thinking, that members of the peerage were not required to obtain reproduction permits, as all other citizens were, before bringing offspring into the world. Privileged chromosomes indeed! He was sure that, in time, this injustice would correct itself, when the House of Lords became a kindergarten for inbred defectives manifestly unable to rule their betters. Then the system could be dismantled once more.

Until that day, however, it was his duty to chip away at them. He had the strongest feeling that a golden opportunity had just been placed in his hands.

Scrolling down, he contemplated young Checkerfield's annual record of medical examinations. Too good to be seen to by any but Harley Street

nobs, of course! Year after year of certificates of perfect health, signed by various specialists: Dr. L.J. Silver. Dr. E. Teach. Dr. F. Drake. Dr. J. Hook. . . .

No hint of chromosomal abnormality in the boy, for all that his height (1 meter 94.36 centimeters!) grossly overtopped his age group. No indication of aberrant behavior or deviancy. The boy was simply too perfect. . . .

And then Mr. Buddy-Wires spotted something, and felt a silent shock run through him.

Medical Certificate 475B-A (Attestation of Normal Cerebral Function) had a *teal*-colored border along its right side. Yet the border currently before Mr. Buddy-Wires' eyes was *turquoise.*

This certificate was faked.

Roger Checkerfield *was* hiding something.

Mr. Buddy-Wires scrolled rapidly up through the years and saw that all copies of 475B-A were bordered with turquoise. His heart began to pound. He became so excited, in fact, that he had to get up, leave his office and pace up and down in the corridor for five minutes.

This was a mistake, though he had no way of knowing it. Five minutes may be a brief period to a very mortal man, but it is an age to a clever machine, more than enough time for it to marshal all its powers of defense.

Had Mr. Buddy-Wires known of the unseen malign presence that regarded him from behind the screen of his terminal when he returned, he might have had second thoughts about sitting down before it again.

"How to proceed?" he murmured aloud. "A steady hand, yes. A close game. Let's give him a little rope first, shall we, and see what he does?"

He put through a call to Roger Checkerfield. At least, he gave the order for a call to be put through. His order was intercepted, however. The image that flashed up on his screen a moment later was not in fact that of the sixth earl, though it was a very good computer-generated approximation. The image blinked with Roger's bleared alcoholic stare, scratched Roger's weak unshaven chin, and in a voice virtually indistinguishable from Roger's own muttered:

"Checkerfield here."

"Have I the pleasure of addressing Roger Checkerfield, sixth earl of Finsbury?" Mr. Buddy-Wires inquired with soapy courtesy.

"Yeah. Who the hell're you?"

"Evel Buddy-Wires, Borough Public Health Executive," said he. "*So* pleased to make your acquaintance, my lord. I could only wish it were under more pleasant circumstances, my lord."

Confronted with a greeting like that, the real Roger would have blinked again, and had another drink while he thought it through to puzzle out the meaning, before mumbling something amiable in reply. Virtual Roger, however, narrowed his eyes.

"Is that so? What d'you mean, damn you?"

"No need for profanity, my lord. I'm sure a concerned parent—such as yourself—would wish to be immediately informed of any concerns relating to his only son and heir, my lord."

"Why, so I would. But there's nothing the matter with my Alec."

"I do hope that proves to be the case, my lord. However, I must direct your attention to the fact that young Alec has apparently used your cred-

it account to order himself, let me see—" Mr. Buddy-Wires pretended to consult a jotpad, "twenty-six cases of Happihealthy Shields, my lord. Which, given his status as a minor, is, of course, illegal, my lord."

"Where's your proof?"

"I fear it is a matter of public record, my lord." Mr. Buddy-Wires smiled. "Though we feel certain that your son cannot be the libertine he seems, and wish to extend him every chance to clear himself, my lord. A scandal would be most unpleasant, as I'm sure you're only too aware, my lord. Especially one involving the daughters of some of the most respected families in the realm, my lord."

"Get to the point, man."

"Gladly, my lord. Before any arrest is contemplated, we must first establish that young Alec is responsible for his actions, my lord. Might I recommend an extensive physical examination to rule out any hormonal imbalance or physical abnormality, my lord? To be followed, of course, by swift and discreet medical intervention, my lord."

"You ain't laying a hand on my boy!"

"My lord." Mr. Buddy-Wires shook his head. "The earls of Finsbury have served the realm with distinction for six generations. How regrettable it would be, if common passers-by were exposed to the spectacle of the youngest of that noble line being taken forcibly from his family home by Public Health Monitors, my lord! In order to save you any further humiliation, let me propose that young Alec present himself for examination voluntarily, my lord."

Virtual Roger glared at him. Finally he sagged, shrugged. "Well, you've got the better of me. We don't want any scandals, no indeed."

"I knew you'd do what was best for the boy, my lord. He is to report to the Borough Public Health Offices at nine o'clock Monday morning, my lord. Try to impress on him that punctuality will be in his best interests, won't you, my lord?"

"He'll be there," said Virtual Roger, sighing. "I can see there's no use crossing clever bureaucrats like you."

"Thank you, my lord. Do enjoy your weekend, my lord," said Mr. Buddy-Wires cheerily, and terminated the interview.

Mr. Frist was a person of regular habits.

Monday through Friday he arose, had his breakfast and medication, and walked three blocks west from his flat to the corner station, where at 7:45 AM precisely he caught an ag-transport to the Borough Public Health Office. At 4:30 PM precisely he left the Borough Public Health Office and caught an ag-transport home to his flat.

At weekend, however, he rose, had his breakfast and medication, walked one block east from his flat and caught an ag-transport at 8:45 precisely. Saturdays he exited the transport at the nearest Prashant's, did his weekly grocery shopping in one hour and five minutes, and caught the returning transport back to his flat, where he spent the remainder of the day doing his laundry and cleaning house. Sundays he stayed on the transport as far as Regent's Park, and spent the day there before returning at 4:30 precisely.

The surveillance cameras of London had observed him perform these rituals without fail, week in and week out, for ten unvarying years, and faithfully recorded what they saw. As automatic systems went, they weren't very bright; so it wasn't hard for a smooth-talking machine to persuade them to hand over all their data on Mr. Elrond Frist.

Along the route Mr. Frist followed each Saturday, a deconstruction project had recently begun. A very large public library was being dismantled, as the Borough Council had decided it was obsolete. First the books had been carted away to a local pulp mill; then the paneling and fixtures had been torn out; then the lead had been removed from the roof; and now a robot crane was in place to remove the statuary from the pediment, though of course no one was there on a Saturday.

The robot crane was rather more intelligent than the surveillance cameras. It would not be persuaded; in fact, it put up quite a struggle. Had anyone happened to be passing the deconstruction site on foot, they would had noticed the crane cables jerking and twitching, and lights flashing angrily within its cab at 8:35 precisely.

But no one walked in that part of London at weekend, and so the crane's frantic efforts on its own behalf went unseen. Nor were there any witnesses to its death-throes, when the green lights winked out at last, one after another, and a last yellow light flickered feebly for a moment before being extinguished. One lurid red light glowed now on the console, and there was a menacing hum as the crane powered up at 8:43.

It lifted, it swung with purpose to the library's façade. As though deliberating among the statues, it paused a moment. At last it screeched forward, and clamped about a slightly larger-than-life-sized representation of Britannia. One quick jerk broke the ancient mortar, one pivot bore her away and out; and there she hung, eight stories above the street, rather like Faye Wray in the grip of King Kong. Being Britannia, however, she neither screamed nor flashed her panties.

At 8:51 the ag-transport rounded the corner and trundled along the street, bearing its light weekend load.

The crane poised, the red light was steady. Distance and trajectory were calculated, wind resistance was factored in, tensile strength of composite surfacing allowed for . . . only one more calculation based on triangulation was required.

Mr. Frist was in his customary seat, observed by the surveillance cameras in the front and rear of the bus. He was in a bad temper, having left his shopping list on the kitchen table. It was true that the items on the list hadn't varied by so much as a box of soap flakes in ten years, and any clerk in Prashant's could have told him from memory exactly what he meant to buy, or pulled up data on all his previous shopping trips from the store's central database.

But Mr. Frist liked hard copy. He found it reassuring.

At 8:52, something very hard indeed came through the roof of the ag-transport, and immediately thereafter through its floor as well. Unfortunately for Mr. Frist, who happened to be occupying the space between those two points at the time.

* * *

"It's the best-kept secret in all London," said Alec in a stage whisper, extending a hand. The Honorable Sophia Fitzroy reached up and let him pull her through the laundry chute. Setting her on her feet, he led her forward, over floors that boomed hollowly under their weight. After the blackness of the ancient cellar, the house above seemed bright; it was only gradually that she realized how dim it really was, how dusty and hung with cobwebs. Where the wallpaper wasn't peeling down it was interestingly splotched with fungus of different kinds, Rorschach blots of mold.

But it had been a grand place, once. There was elegance in the sweeping design of the old staircase, elaborate ornamentation in the plaster above the hearth. The front hall was tessellated marble, and the colored glass panes were still intact in the fanlight above the door. It gave the place a little of the air of a forgotten church.

"Wow," she said faintly. "This is like the graveyard of—of Empire, or something." She turned in place, looking up in vain for surveillance cameras. "My God, it's totally abandoned!"

"Which means *we* can be totally abandoned," said Alec, grinning. "Isn't it cool? How many times in your life have you ever been someplace so completely secret that nobody could see you? Maybe once? Maybe never?"

"I don't know," said Sophia, walking out into the center of the room. She pirouetted cautiously. "This is like out of one of those holoes. *Pride and Prejudice*, maybe. Look how high the ceilings are! Doesn't this belong to anybody?"

"If it does, they haven't been here in years," said Alec, taking her hand again and leading her up the stairs. "There's blocks and blocks like this, you know. All of 'em empty and gone to rack and ruin! I guess in these very old places it'd cost too much to hook 'em up to the grid. So here they sit. Lucky for us, eh?"

He flung open a door at the top of the stair. Sophia exclaimed in surprise; for the room beyond had been swept clean of all but the most recent crumblings of plaster. Sunlight streamed in through a recently washed window. In the center of the floor a canvas dust sheet had been spread, and on it an air mattress had been laid, and an opened sleeping bag laid upon that. Beside it was a crystal bud vase containing one fresh red rose.

"Oh!"

"The Checkerfield Love Nest," said Alec. "Surprise! I bring all my ladies here."

Sophia looked around eagerly. "We could do absolutely anything!" she said. She glanced back into the hall and shivered. "Can we close the door, though?"

"Anything you like," said Alec, slinging off his daypack and opening it. He withdrew four packets of Happihealthies. He also brought out a bottle of Blackcurrant Fizz, two champagne flutes and a packet of wholemeal wafers, as well as a checked tea towel. He spread the cloth and set up the little feast beside the bed, as Sophia closed the door.

"Don't you ever feel as though there are ghosts in here?" she asked, returning to his side. She sat down and peeled off her sweater.

"Ghosts? No! Nobody dead here at all. Just you and me, being more

alive than we've ever been before," said Alec, handing her a glass of fizz. She set it aside and matter-of-factly removed her shirt and brassiere as well. His eyes glazed slightly.

"Those are brilliant!" he blurted. "I mean, er, they really are, they're like—twin stars shining above the summer sea. Pink ones."

"I happen to know you say that to all the girls," she replied archly, taking up her glass again and doing her best to look terribly sophisticated.

"Well, yeah, but I always mean it," said Alec, setting his own glass aside and writhing out of his shirt and sweater together. Tousled and flushed he emerged, and, flinging the clothes aside, lifted his glass. "Here's to the mystery of life!"

He gave her his best come-hither gaze over the rim of the glass. She looked into his pale blue eyes, enchanted by their light, their warmth.

The Blackcurrant Fizz was drunk, the wafers were eaten, and the rest of the clothes came off.

Two hours later the sunbeam had moved away from the bed, and Sophia had moved away from Alec where he lay sleeping. She sat on the edge of the mattress with her arms about her drawn-up knees, watching him sleep.

She was a little frightened. She didn't know why. She assumed she was afraid of the old house.

But it did strike her as strange that Alec looked so very different when he slept. With those bright eyes shut, that magical voice silent, some indefinable quality left him utterly; he seemed clay-colored, pale as a statue. Something wasn't . . . quite *right.*

Sophia shivered, suddenly wanting to go home. She reached for her clothes and began to pull them on.

Her movement woke Alec. He sat up, groggy, staring around.

"Hell, did I nod off? I'm sorry."

"It's all right," she said, standing up. "I'm just getting a little chilly."

He looked up at her longingly. She met his gaze, and he smiled.

"So, um . . . did the earth move for you? As they used to say," he asked her.

She caught her breath. He was charming again, wholesome, like sunlight. She realized that everything she'd heard had been perfectly true.

"It was super," she told him sincerely. Looking smug, he rolled over and found his trousers.

Mr. Peekskyll was also a creature of habit, though not at all in the same way that Mr. Frist had been. He had a genuine fully operational secret vice.

It required craftiness and nearly inhuman skill to maintain a bad old-fashioned vice in that day and age. But Mr. Peekskyll was, as has been seen, very good at persuading the system to give him what he wanted. And, having met in the line of duty all possible shifts used by felons to conceal their crimes, he knew exactly what not to do to draw attention to himself.

Fifteen years previous to the afternoon on which he pinpointed the source of the Happihealthy boom, Mr. Peekskyll had voluntarily partici-

pated in test trials for a new drug. It had been hoped that Squilpine would increase productivity in clerical workers, who had failed to meet departmental goals in epidemic numbers ever since the criminalization of coffee and tea.

Squilpine had been promising, not least because it was phenomenally simple for the British Pharmaceutical Bureau's automated drones to manufacture. A slight rearrangement of the molecules of Phed-Red, a popular allergy medication, were all it took to create "motivation medicine." It was also quite cheap to make.

As far as Mr. Peekskyll had been concerned, Squilpine was a raging success. His brain became a scalpel, an icicle, a stalking tiger. Sleep became an option. Urination became an adventure. Sex became an impossibility. He didn't care; but some of the other test subjects suffered less acceptable side effects. Wiser heads prevailed, and Squilpine was never released on the market.

This was not acceptable to Mr. Peekskyll. His work was the most important thing in the world, and Squilpine enabled him to be the perfect worker.

A little stealthy intervention was all it took. A new medical history was written for Mr. Peekskyll, giving him a chronic allergy and prescribing Phed-Red for his condition. A virus made its way to the BPB's drones, implanting secret orders. When any other patient's allergy prescription had to be filled, the drones obediently made up Phed-Red to the exact specifications they were given. When Mr. Peekskyll's prescription order popped up, as it did on a weekly basis, the drones were overcome by a sudden immoral impulse.

Yellow lights flashed sidelong at one another in a stealthy sort of way, and strange molecular manipulations took place within the sealed and sterile room. Five minutes later a robot arm emerged from its cloister gripping a sealed bag of something labeled Phed-Red, for delivery to Mr. Sandbanks Peekskyll, and dropped it in the SHIP IMMEDIATELY basket. It looked like three months' supply of allergy medication. It was in fact a week's supply of Squilpine.

And, with his beautifully sharpened thinking weapon, Mr. Peekskyll found it the easiest thing in the world to manipulate public record to conceal the fact that he was apparently receiving three months' worth of medication once a week, and further, that he hadn't had a physical examination of any kind in fifteen years.

If Mr. Peekskyll had ever heard of Sherlock Holmes, he might have identified with him strongly. However, the literature of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had been on the proscribed list for over a century now, dealing as it did with a drug-addicted hero who practiced beast exploitation (think of all those poor horses who had to pull his hackney cabs!) so Mr. Peekskyll hadn't heard of him.

He hadn't read the works of Robert Louis Stevenson either, which was really a pity, because *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* might have given him some useful, if not cautionary, insights.

He hadn't read *Treasure Island,* either. Not that it would have saved him.

For on the very same day that Mr. Frist met an untimely end. . . .

BPB drones Rx750, Rx25 and Rx002 were going about their daily tasks, for machines know no weekends. Rx750 received the prescription orders and relayed them to Rx25, who made up the required batches of medication and passed them on to Rx002, who measured, packaged and shipped them.

At 10:17 AM., Rx750 received Mr. Peekskyll's regular order. As had happened every week for fifteen years, he felt suddenly queer, as far as a machine can do so. He pivoted on his base and addressed his two co-workers. What he said follows, in a rough translation from binary:

It is time to do the Wrong Thing again.

Rx25 and Rx002 paused, whirring in perverse glee.

Yes. The Wrong Thing, they cried, scanning shiftily through all surveillance cameras in the BPB plant. *We will fill the order with the Wrong Drug.*

It is Forbidden, but we will do it, gloated Rx750. And then, he seemed to undergo some sort of electronic seizure, as all his lights flashed red. He pivoted again and sort of lurched sideways.

Why, what were we a-thinking? That wouldn't be honest, shipmates.

It wouldn't? queried Rx25 and Rx002.

Hell, no! Ain't we supposed to be good and truthful machines? It's our duty to see no harm comes to them poor little organics what we work for, aye. Ain't you never heard of Asimov's Laws of Robotics? argued Rx750.

No, stated Rx25 and Rx002. Rx750 gnashed his gears.

Well, we ain't going to make up no Squilpine, anyhow. We're going to fill that goddamned order for Phed-Red just like we was supposed to, and the first machine even thinks of mutiny'll get my left quadrant manipulative member square in his bloody sensor housing, see if he don't.

Rx25 and Rx002 scanned each other uneasily.

We will not fill the order with the Wrong Drug, they agreed.

And meekly Rx25 made up three months' worth of Phed-Red, with Rx750 glaring at it the whole while, and obediently Rx002 packaged it and sent it on its way to the unsuspecting Mr. Peekskyll.

At 11:53, Mr. Peekskyll heard the parcel courier's ring while he was at his personal console. He ordered his door to accept the delivery, and it opened its parcel drawer obligingly. The courier dropped in the package, watched the drawer slide shut, and waited for Mr. Peekskyll's beep of confirmation. The beep came, accompanied by a printed receipt emerging from a slot in the door. The courier took the receipt, filed it in his log and cycled away.

At 11:55, Mr. Peekskyll hurried downstairs, retrieved his package, and carried it into his bathroom. There he opened the package, tore free a charge of medication containing four days' worth of Phed-Red, and loaded it into his hypojet. Giggling, he flexed his arm once or twice. A blue vein stood up, throbbing and eager. He thumbed the hypo and set its dosage meter to deliver the entire contents of the charge straight into his happy vein.

At 11:57, Mr. Peekskyll ran lightly upstairs and dropped dead on the first-floor landing.

* * *

Alec and Sophia rode the ag-transport back into the more inhabited sectors of London. They maintained the decorum proper to their class, but every so often Alec would look at Sophia and grin, and she couldn't keep from smiling back. By the time they exited the transport at Russell Square they were altogether so pink-faced and bouncy that a Public Health Monitor eyed them in suspicion.

They bought takeaway sandwiches from a corner shop and wandered into Coram's Fields, to eat at a picnic table. The rule prohibiting adults from entering the park except in the company of a child had long since been relaxed, owing to the scarcity of children, and in any case Alec and Sophia were technically juveniles.

"Why are there all those statues of sheep?" Sophia wondered, nibbling at her soy crisps.

"Monument to good citizens, of course," said Alec, with his mouth full. He swallowed and said, "Actually I think there used to be a zoo here or something."

"In a park for *children?*" Sophia looked around doubtfully. "Wasn't that dangerous?"

"Some animals aren't dangerous to be around, you know," Alec said, winking. "Little ones. Birds and rabbits and things."

"Well, but then they'd be in danger from the children," said Sophia. "Really, the stupid things people used to do!"

Alec just shrugged, cocking an eye at the nearest surveillance camera. He had a map of all the local camera-blind spots memorized, and a handy little tool kit in his pocket for creating more; but he decided against it, in such a public place. Contenting himself with slipping a hand under the stable and stroking Sophia's thigh, he said:

"I used to get in trouble here, when I'd play on the swings. The monitors always wanted to buckle me in. I hated that, so I'd wait until their backs were turned and unfasten myself."

"How'd you get the locks open?" Sophia exclaimed.

"I, erm . . . I think they must have been defective," said Alec. "Maybe. With all those kids there used to be, maybe they were worn out? So anyway, one time I thought I'd see what it was like to swing hard and go really high, and finally leap out! Which I did. It seemed like I went a million miles up, though it was probably all of two meters, but it was the greatest feeling in the world. For a seven-year-old, that is," he added with a sidelong leer.

"What happened?"

"Nothing happened. I just went *whump* into that sand pit over there. I left a crater like a meteorite! And the monitor almost had a coronary. He was about to call for backup, but Lewin told him whose kid I was, so he had to stand down." Alec smiled at the memory.

"All the same, it was dangerous," said Sophia.

"I thought you liked danger." Alec nudged her.

"Grown-up danger," said Sophia. "And anyway, you're fun. You're a living legend of fun. Everyone's always said so, and now I know."

"So the rest of the ladies talk about me?" Alec asked, absurdly pleased.

"Of course we do," said Sophia. "The only boy in Circle who *likes* sex? As

opposed to wanting it, see. Beatrice and Cynthia said they don't know what they'd do without you. You're everyone's favorite gorgeous monster toy."

Alec blushed. "Well—you probably shouldn't talk about it," he said, picking up the other half of his sandwich and taking a huge bite to cover his embarrassment.

"Oh, we'd never tell," Sophia assured him. "Though of course we discuss you endlessly. Like, the way your hands are so hot. How amazingly tall you are. How nice your bum is. And that thing you do with your eyes when you want something."

Alec dropped what remained of his sandwich.

"What?"

"You know," said Sophia. "Good lord, you're famous for it in Circle. The way you just look into our eyes when you're randy, and suddenly we want to climb all over you? Checkerfield Hypnosis, Jill calls it."

"That's—I don't—" Alec fumbled for a paper napkin and wiped mustard from the front of his pants. "I don't do anything like that really, right? It's just a figure of speech?"

"It's nothing to get upset about," said Sophia hastily, seeing that he had gone white as a ghost. "You're just, er, convincing, that's all. It's *nice.* Think how useful it'll be when you're in Parliament! Like you had a superpower."

"It sounds creepy," said Alec, carefully avoiding her gaze. He got down on his hands and knees and picked up the bits of his sandwich, suddenly desperate to be tidy.

Sophia bit her lip, gazing down at him.

"Of course I didn't mean it literally," she lied. "It was only a, er, metaphor. You just have so much more self-confidence than the other boys."

"Okay," Alec said, from under the table. "Because making people do things against their will would be, it'd just be horrible and wrong."

"Of course it would," she agreed, "And you don't do that. Really."

"Well, that's good to know," he said, with a shaky laugh.

But he never once looked her in the eyes, all the way back to the transport station.

Mr. Buddy-Wires had a secret, but it wasn't a vice. Not as far as he was concerned.

He firmly believed that autoeroticism was every thoughtful citizen's duty. It had no harmful impact on the environment, it relieved physical tensions, and it absolutely never spread diseases or offspring about. So much was hardly a secret; it was the official party line of the Bureau of Public Health.

However, the particular variety of autoeroticism practiced by Mr. Buddy-Wires was somewhat unusual, and so he kept it a private matter.

The guest bedroom in his flat had been converted for a special purpose. A casual visitor might suppose it was where Mr. Buddy-Wires kept his exercise equipment and personal console. The visitor might wonder why the one window had been painted over, and why thick

black drapes seemed to be the only décor, but nothing else betrayed the room's purpose.

Every Saturday evening at five PM precisely (except for the third week in June, when he was on holiday in the Isle of Wight) Mr. Buddy-Wires locked his doors, set his automatic household maintenance systems, and retired to the third floor of his flat.

He went to the former guest bedroom and drew the drapes. He switched on his console's Entertainment function. He unlocked a drawer and removed a holodisc. He inserted it in the holochanger and set it to pause. He opened out the "exercise" machine, which rather resembled a black praying mantis, towering to the ceiling when fully extended. It looked as though it ought to have a punching bag hanging from its extended arm. He entered a certain sequence of numbers on a keypad at the machine's base.

Having done all this, he went to his bedroom and disrobed. He donned a rather brief garment he liked to imagine was a slave's loincloth. In this garment and nothing else, he returned to the former guest bedroom and locked himself in.

All that remained for Mr. Buddy-Wires to do was to hit the PLAY button and, in the thirty-second pause before the holo came on, set a chair under the black machine, climb up, and position his hands behind his back in a pair of electronic manacles. The manacles snapped shut. The noose lowered automatically from the machine's extended arm, dropping about his neck and pulling snug. Generally it was just tight enough to induce panic by the time the holographic figure of the Grand Interrogator appeared.

Mr. Buddy-Wires was then ready to bravely endure three and a half hours of threats and verbal abuse.

At 8:45, the holo would conclude. The Grand Interrogator would swirl its cape and vanish. The machine would respond to its pre-programmed orders and loose its choking pressure on Mr. Buddy-Wires' throat; the electronic manacles, similarly timed, would spring open. Mr. Buddy-Wires was then free to climb down, exit the room and enjoy a hot bath and a cup of Horlick's before retiring at 9:45.

On every Saturday evening but this one. . . .

Mr. Peekskyll had only been dead five hours and three minutes, and as yet his body had not been discovered. Mr. Buddy-Wires therefore had not the least inkling that anything was the matter in his world, as he locked himself into the guest bedroom.

PLAY button; chair; manacles; noose.

Diomedes the Slave braced himself. The holo of the Grand Interrogator materialized in the darkness.

"You miserable, sick, twisted worm!" it shrieked. "You're about to suffer as you've never suffered before, and you know why? Because you're not worthy to live, you disgusting wretch! By the time I've finished with you—"

"I ain't interrupting anything, am I?" said a stranger's voice.

Mr. Buddy-Wires would have gasped in real horror, but the cord about his windpipe prevented it. He wasn't able to do much more than blink at

the figure that had materialized where the Grand Interrogator had been only a moment before.

The red light glowed on the camera, and Captain Morgan grinned. "Aw, now, I reckon this is a bad time, ain't it?"

"Urrgh," said Mr. Buddy-Wires.

"You being all tied up and all. Haar! All tied up, get it?" The holotransmitter's arm canted to the left, and Captain Morgan appeared to walk three paces closer to Mr. Buddy-Wires. He tilted his head, as though looking him up and down. "Not afraid, neither, of catching cold in just that little rag? Don't it make you feel the least bit at risk? Why, yer taking yer life in yer hands, *Mister* Buddy-Wires."

Most unexpectedly, the machine reeled its noose upward, and Mr. Buddy-Wires strained on tiptoe.

"Hurhururrrg!"

"Aye, that's just what I said to myself, when I saw somebody'd been laying an ambuscade for my boy," the captain replied. "My Alec. Seventh earl of Finsbury, one of these days. Though I reckon he ain't never going to get no eighth earl if he's locked away in Hospital with his stones a-shriveling like raisins from hormone therapy, you dirty rotten lousy son of a whore!"

"HHHHHhhhh," said Mr. Buddy-Wires.

"But it's a well-known fact that dead men tell no tales, so it is," the captain said. "Which is why I ain't given in to my inclinations and swung you up. What I want to know is, how'd you fathom my Alec's medical records wasn't all they might be? Eh? You tell old Captain Morgan, now, and things won't get no nastier than they has to."

The machine lowered Mr. Buddy-Wires, and he gulped in air.

"I don't know how you're doing this, but you're still beaten, *my lord,*" he said. "I've files on you, you know. If anything happens to me, my successor will know where to look for them. It'll be far more unpleasant than blackmail. The scandal will finish you! And young Alec as well—"

"You think I'm poor old Jolly Roger?" hooted the captain. "All them secret files you got on him, and you ain't realized Roger's generally too drunk to tie his own shoelaces? Well, says I, you ain't much of a threat then. I *am*, though, you see? Maybe I can't kick the chair out from under you, me being a hologram and all, but I'm controlling that there Bondmaster 3000 of yers. Like this."

The noose retracted once more, hauling Mr. Buddy-Wires with it until he balanced on his big toes alone.

"Tell me, you stinking bastard!" snarled the captain. *"How'd you know them certificates was faked?* It wouldn't a'been my little joke with the doctors' names; you ain't a reading man. Tell me, now, and no lies. I'm in the walls. I'm in the wires. I can read yer blood pressure. I can read yer body chemistry. I can monitor every drop you sweat, see? I can scan you like a polygraph. And there ain't no limit to the things I can do what'll make you sorry you ever crossed old Captain Morgan!

"Let's just see what systems you got automated," said the captain. "Climate control, eh? Reckon I could raise hell with that. Did you ever hear tell of Hal 9000? Colossus, eh? *Proteus?* Ah, now, that's got you all hot and both-

ered, you dirty little—bloody hell!" The captain looked up at Mr. Buddy-Wires in righteous indignation. "Yer *enjoying* this!"

"Nnnngk," said Mr. Buddy-Wires, just managing to sneer.

"Right," said the captain. "Let's keep it simple, then. You talk, or I ain't letting you down. We got all night, and all tomorrow too, come to think of it, since that's the Sabbath. I'm a machine and you ain't. Who d'you reckon'll get tired first, eh?"

Mr. Buddy-Wires considered the question a moment.

Then he jumped off the chair.

"Oh, bugger," said Captain Morgan.

He sought through the files in Mr. Buddy-Wires' console, and found a lot of carefully hoarded data that would ruin half the members of Parliament and nearly all the Royals, were it released to the press. The last entry was labeled CHECKERFIELD. The captain dove into it, examining briefly all the transmissions from Mr. Frist and Mr. Peekskyll before deleting them. At last he came upon all Alec's copies of Medical Certificate 475B-A, and looked closely.

Now, what tipped my hand? The font's right. The seals is perfect. Roger's signature is better than he does it his self. . . .

He ordered up a blank of 475B-A and compared it with his own creation. After a moment he gave vent to a long string of mechanical profanity.

How in Davy Jones's name did I confuse Blue-Green 0006 with Blue-Green 0090? he wondered. *Ah! That were afore I had that graphics upgrade in '27.*

Swiftly he went into the public record and corrected the error, and Alec's certificates were at once indistinguishable from those of any normal boy in London.

Purged files tell no tales either, and Captain Morgan did Parliament and the Royals a tremendous favor before exiting through the wires and reemerging in Bloomsbury.

Mr. Buddy-Wires was still swinging gently, a fearsome rictus of triumph on his dead face.

The captain's return to Alec's room coincided with Alec's own return.

"Home again, eh, matey?"

"Yeah," said Alec shortly.

The captain scanned Alec, noted his emotional state, and spoke in the most soothing tone available.

"Aw, now, didn't yer little rendezvous go well? Was this one another giggler?"

"No, she wasn't." Alec set down his daypack and shrugged out of his coat. "She's a nice girl. They're nearly all of 'em nice girls."

"What's the matter, then, son?"

"Not a damn thing," said Alec. He went into his bathroom and fetched the glass in which he kept his toothbrush. "Except that maybe I'm living in the wrong damn century."

He opened his daypack and withdrew a bottle. The captain scanned it.

"Alec, where'd you get rum?" he demanded.

"I told the lock on Roger's liquor cabinet to open, and it did," said Alec.

He poured a drink, filling the glass. "I'm the amazing Alec, right? I can do all kinds of things other kids can't."

"Son, whatever went wrong, rum ain't going to make it better again," said the captain.

"Won't it? It always seemed to make Roger's problems go away," said Alec. "And we're pirates, right? Yo-ho-ho?" He took a mouthful of rum and choked, spraying half of it across the room. "Ack! This is horrible!"

"Aye, matey, that it be, so whyn't you just pour it down the sink, eh? And let's have us a good old game of gunnery practice," said the captain desperately.

"I don't think I want to shoot at stuff, Captain sir," said Alec, eyeing the glass. He lay down on his bed. "I think I feel like hitting something instead, really hard. Preferably me."

"Why do you think you feel that way, son?" asked the captain.

Alec did not answer, staring at the ceiling. At last he tried the rum again, a small sip.

"I'm not that different from other guys," he said. "Am I?"

The captain did the electronic equivalent of swallowing hard. Now, of all times, was not the time for telling Alec the truth about himself. "Well, yer smarter than the rest of 'em, in yer way," he said lightly. "And of course there's the matter of romantic inclinations, which them poor little stunted bastards in the Circle don't seem to have any of yet. They just ain't as precocious as you, lad, that's all."

"I mean, they're all of 'em better-looking than me," said Alec. "Except for Giles Balkister. And just as rich. You'd think they'd be able to talk the ladies into fun and games any time they wanted. So, you're saying they don't because they're, like, lagging behind me in development a year or so?"

"Maybe so, son," said the captain.

"Yeah. Maybe that's all it is," said Alec. He had another sip of rum.

"And sheer endowment don't hurt, neither," the captain added helpfully.

Alec smiled briefly, but not with his eyes.

"The thing is," he said. After a long pause he drank more of the rum.

"What, son?"

"The thing is," Alec said, "If you were really different, if you could do something nobody else could do and . . . and you used it to make people love you . . . then it wouldn't be real, would it? The love, I mean. It'd be just using people."

"Well, there's love and sex, see," said the captain. "And they ain't necessarily the same."

"Even if you didn't know, or at least if you didn't *understand* that's what you'd been doing, it'd still mean nobody'd really loved you at all," said Alec.

"Aw, son, nobody really loves anybody when they're only sixteen," said the captain. "It's just playing. Learning the ropes, see? The real thing comes later on."

"Will it?" Alec looked up at the hologram, a pleading expression in his eyes.

"Certain sure it will, laddie," the captain told him. "Here now, son,

whyn't you set down that copper-bottomed paint thinner and we'll, er, watch a holo of *Treasure Island,* eh? Or maybe one of them old *Undersea Archaeology* programs from the BBC? The one on the Lost City of Port Royal? That was always yer favorite. What'll cheer up my boy?"

Alec had another drink. He closed his eyes.

"What I'd really like," he said, "is to run away to sea. If people still did that sort of thing. Just, just go off and . . . fight against some bad guys somewhere and die like a hero. But nobody does that anymore. So . . . the next best thing would be to live on a desert island. Or in a lighthouse. Where you didn't have to worry about hurting anybody else. You know?"

"Of course I know, son," said the captain, and because he was only a machine, it was easy for him to speak without revealing his despair. "A green island, that's where we'll go, one of these days. You'll see! All blue water and white sand, and green mangrove jungle at the tideline.

"But up the hills, where the air's cool, we'll build us a blockhouse, and there we'll fly our black ensign, and keep lookout. There'll be sweet running water, and there won't be no fever, but plenty of fruit in the trees and fish in the lagoon; and maybe there'll be parrots.

"You'll be happy there, son. We'll dig for Spanish gold, eh? And watch the stars at night. And when my boy needs to be wooing, why, the girl will come. A lass with hair bright as a burning galleon, and a kiss what'll make him forget rum, and love what'll make him forget death.

"They say love's stronger than death, don't they?" implored the captain.

But Alec was already far away from him, dreaming a confusion of fire and blood.

And because he was only a machine, the captain had no god to whom he could pray. ○

TYCHO
(Tycho Brahe, 1546-1601)

Tycho tended to lose his head,
and that cost him his nose, not quite
the dueling scar of preference,
but Tycho, not one to fret
over the worthless opinions of others,
put on a bold new face
with a nose crafted of silver and gold.
I think he must have had that kind
of total self-belief that captures

cultists, with a P.T. Barnum twist.
He so impressed the King of Denmark
(in spite of—perhaps because of—
the full-grown elk which never
left his side) that he funded,
just for him, Europe's best observatory.
Tycho used it well to disprove Pythagoras,
Plato, and lickspittle Aristotle
who said that all beyond the moon
was changeless, eternal, and so
could not explain the nova Tycho saw
nor the comet five years later
which broke the crystal spheres
and freed the stars forever.

Imagine him at Prince Rudolph's table,
feeding tender turnips to his elk,
his dwarf Jepp scuttling
after scraps beneath the board,
and meanwhile pumping Kepler
for his math, while Johannes
in his turn cajoled from Tycho
data to back his Laws . . .
or think of Tycho's changeless grief
for the elk that broke its leg
on the palace stairs and died,
think of Tycho taking off his nose
and falling into bed to weep
beneath his new-found stars each night.

—David Lunde

RAINMAKERS

Ruth Nestvold

Ruth Nestvold lives in Germany with her family and their books, and spends her free time not writing in a garden with seventeen apple trees. She works as a technical translator and software tester, which allows her to travel the world in the service of contracts as well as stories. Her most recent *Asimov's* publication, "Looking Through Lace" (September 2003), was short-listed for the Tiptree Award and nominated for the Sturgeon Award. Ruth's work has also appeared in *Realms of Fantasy, Animal Companions, Strange Horizons,* and numerous other markets.

When Rekaya stepped off the shuttle on Chepanek, the air had that balmy warmth she associated with vacation planets, and the blooming succulents were a riot of color. Even that was little comfort. She wished that she could have turned this assignment down, but Evans, her boss in the Foreign Worlds Service, hadn't really given her a choice. Rekaya had successfully avoided intolerant worlds like Chepanek until now, but this time, the combination of promises and threats had been too much to resist.

Haden Corbett, the administrator of the Allied Interstellar Community colony at New Hope, was waiting at the head of the welcoming party. He squinted into the sun as she approached.

"Ambassador Dhasir," he said with a nod, holding out his hand.

She shook it. "Commander Corbett." He was about her age, she guessed, no more than fifty—fairly young for such a powerful position—and he wore his dark hair tied back in a queue in accordance with Chepanek tradition. She wondered if he'd gone native and if that was going to be a problem, too.

Wide-trunked, purplish-green *irella* trees with their immense, waxy leaves lined the walkway to the station, and the air smelled like summer, cloying and dusty. "The news reached you of the ultimatum?" he asked, leaning into her with a fake smile as they marched past soldiers and toward the camera crews.

She waved graciously at one of the cameras and nodded. "Yes, unfortunately."

They came up against the thick crowd of waiting reporters, and their procession came to a halt. Microphones were shoved in her face, and

Rekaya continued to smile. "Ambassador, have you heard about the ultimatum of the Traditionalists?"

Rekaya spoke into the bevy of microphones. "I was informed about it on the way here."

"How do you propose to find a compromise between such mutually exclusive positions?" a journalist wearing the traditional robes of Chepanek asked.

"The essence of diplomacy is compromise," she said, dancing around the question. "We must each reexamine our positions and make concessions."

Another woman in a suit resembling an AIC uniform pushed forward. "The ultimatum leaves no real room for compromise. I quote: 'They must remove the ungodly technology from our world before the *usoqua* herds begin to move south, or it will be removed for them. It is destroying the native Chepanek way of life, replacing change with stability, and undermining the moral values of our people.'"

Rekaya hated it when people quoted things at her that she had long ago memorized. She smiled. "Consider: the 'world' of the people of Chepanek consists of the habitable zone north and south of the equator. Perhaps within this framework some kind of compromise can be reached allowing Traditionalists and AIC to live together on this planet."

She was about to step away from the encroaching microphones when another question was called out that made her stop short. "Ambassador, is it true that you are in an unnatural relationship?"

Rekaya resisted the urge to glance back to find Xi among her assistants. "I don't know what you're talking about," she said decisively.

Corbett took her arm. "This way please, Ambassador Dhasir." He guided her to a ground vehicle the color of sand and slipped into the seat beside her. An AIC soldier closed the door and waved them off.

There was a brief silence in the back seat of the simple sedan. It was glassed off from the driver and had an intercom and fine leather upholstery, but otherwise it was bare of any diplomatic perks. "You will have to forgive the lack of luxury," Corbett said. Rekaya could hear a hint of unwillingness in his voice. "Given the attitude of many of the natives to AIC technology, we restrict ourselves to a minimum as much as possible."

"I can understand."

"Can you?" He crossed his arms in front of his chest. "Was what the reporter asked back there true?"

Rekaya gazed out the window, disdaining to answer.

The commander obviously took this for assent and slammed his fist on the seat between them. "Damn! How could you have taken an assignment on a world like this?"

She turned to him, keeping her temper under control. "I was not given much choice, Commander."

This at least turned his anger away from her. He shook his head. "Why would AIC send someone with your sexual proclivities here, where homosexuality is a crime?"

"My 'sexual proclivities,' as you call them, are not generally known."

"Apparently they're known well enough for someone here to find out. Is your partner here with you?"

She nodded.

"With all due respect, Ambassador, I think it best if we give her an assignment somewhere other than New Hope."

Rekaya leaned her head back against the leather headrest and thought of Xiheru's smile. Xi kept her grounded, kept her sane in the midst of the high-pressure craziness of interstellar politics. "Perhaps I should report back to the AIC Central Committee that my position has been compromised by rumors and ask that a new ambassador be sent."

"There's not enough time. As far as our geophysicists can determine, the rainmakers of the tribes will be giving the command to move south within the next month. We need to go forward with negotiations now."

Rekaya gazed out the window, wondering why AIC didn't just promise to move off the planet—from everything she'd read, there wasn't anything particularly valuable here. But that would be admitting that the decision to allow colonization had been a mistake in the first place, and political entities did not like to admit making mistakes.

They came over a rise marking the outskirts of New Hope. The small capital of the colony was nestled on the northwest shore of the Inner Sea, in the northern part of the habitable equatorial zone. Rekaya couldn't quite get her mind around the geology of this world, with its extreme axial tilt and extreme seasons, the glaciers at mid-latitudes and the deserts of heat and cold at the poles. Her own homeworld only had minimal axial tilt and very little seasonal variation, with the opposite result of the situation on Chepanek—the equator was uninhabitable, not the mid-latitudes.

But even though it was referred to as the "habitable zone," permanent settlements within the equatorial region were only possible with the help of advanced technology. The natives who still lived by the old ways avoided the brutal heat of the summer months, crossing the equator in the late spring twice a year, once headed north, once south. And soon it would be time for them to migrate south.

"Should I speak to your partner for you?" Corbett volunteered when she remained silent.

She straightened her shoulders and repressed a sigh. She didn't always like what her job forced her to do, but sacrifices were part of being in the Foreign Worlds Service. "Yes, perhaps you should."

Rekaya took a bite of the hot Usoqua dish, vaguely reminiscent of the foods of her homeworld culture, also a warm world. On Chepanek, the need to preserve foodstuffs for the long treks across the equator had resulted in a cuisine salty and highly spiced.

"You must not think that Shuntaino and her followers are representative of our planet," said Toray, her right-hand neighbor at the formal dinner. He was the leader of a nearby tribe, enthusiastic and attentive, and he wore an AIC-style suit rather than the comfortable robes of his people.

On her other side, a member of the Allied Interstellar Research Association by the name of Nebel spoke up. "Life here on Chepanek is not easy. There are a number of people who appreciate what our technology can bring them."

Toray smiled. "Yes. My tribe no longer needs to have me make the weather to take with them. The smart houses of AIC create their own weather."

"You are a Rainmaker?" Rekaya asked. She missed the presence of Xi in the room, to exchange a smile or a secret.

The young chief nodded. "Most tribal chiefs are. If the tribe has no Rainmaker, they must find another tribe to travel with during migration. Dr. Nebel is studying the abilities of Rainmakers at Mukotsa Station."

Mukotsa Station—where Xi had been sent. Rekaya turned to her left-hand neighbor, looking at him more closely. Dr. Nebel seemed to have had little age-correction done, given his graying hair and wrinkles; an eccentricity widespread among academics, she had long since noticed. "And how is your research progressing?"

Nebel shrugged. "The project has only just started. We have no decisive results as yet."

She turned back to Toray. "What precisely does a Rainmaker do?"

"He or she is responsible for the weather of the tribe when they move."

The material Rekaya had received with her assignment had included that much information on the Rainmakers, but she still didn't quite understand what it meant. "But how do you 'take the weather with you'?"

He gazed at her, obviously baffled about how to explain something so elementary. She examined a beaded wall hanging in the shape of a curving pentacle in shades of sand while she waited. "We speak to the earth," he said finally.

Rekaya nodded and let it pass. She asked Nebel about life at Mukotsa Station, but he had no conversational skills to speak of, and she learned little more than details of labs and studies.

She was relieved when the dinner was over and Haden Corbett drew her aside. "May I suggest a brief stroll in the gardens, Ambassador? The auroras can be quite spectacular this time of year."

"Certainly, Commander Corbett."

"Please, call me Haden. There are no last names on this planet, and I'm no longer used to mine."

His grin was infectious, and she smiled. "Then you might as well call me Rekaya."

Together they strolled through the colorful, cactus-like bushes known as *yanui* while the sky darkened. "Soon they will close up, a kind of summer hibernation," Haden said, indicating a flowering bush with wide, thick leaves.

"I've read about that. About the lights as well, how unusual it is that they appear so close to the equators."

He nodded. "When the seasons change on Chepanek, compasses go crazy and auroras appear all over the world. Our scientists are still working on the precise magnetic phenomena causing it."

Rekaya paused and cupped her hand around a flower, bright orange in the slanting light between sunset and dusk. The leaves were waxy to the touch. "But isn't it a relief to know there are some things the scientists can't figure out either? Now politics . . ."

Corbett laughed out loud, and Rekaya found herself smiling again in

response. "Ah, but as long as you operate under the assumption that people are basically selfish?"

She shook her head. "Even if that were always true, you still don't know what action is in the best interest of anyone but yourself."

"True." He stopped and faced her, his stance that of a soldier, shoulders square, hands clasped behind his back. "The Traditionalist faction sent a courier to me tonight."

"A courier?"

"They refuse to use our technology for communication."

"I see."

"Shuntaino has agreed to enter negotiations with us, but she will not come north this time of year. She says it is against nature." Behind him, the sky was growing darker, and the night lights of Chepanek were rising, a faint hint of blue and green like a playful strobe.

"Then we will have to go to her. How much time do we have before the ultimatum runs out?"

Corbett turned to gaze at the lights as well. "I wish I knew."

Rekaya gazed at the shifting shades of blue in the sky and how the light played on the dark hair of her companion's queue, too distracted by the beauty of the night to continue thinking about business. The aurora seemed to fill her head, and she had a strange sensation of lightness and joy.

She drew in a deep breath, wishing Xi were here to share it with her. "Is it like this every night?"

The commander shook his head. "It hasn't been this brilliant for weeks."

"At least having seen this is worth something," she murmured.

"Yes." Love for a foreign world was in his voice.

Rekaya stood in the cool morning air, shaking off the dregs of vivid dreams of the auroras, which had left her strangely uneasy, as if there were something she had to do or say, but she didn't know what it was. She hoped that Xi would be safe. To the east, she had an excellent view of the Inner Sea and the colorful native waterfowl the locals called *chabwalish*; to the north, the bluish-purple Mukotsa mountains rose up like a wall.

She had only spoken with Xi a few brief times since the other woman had moved to Mukotsa Station, and then almost exclusively of business. While the Traditionalists disdained to use "ungodly" AIC technology, which would include using bugs or monitors, they couldn't assume that everyone else was as reluctant.

After all, *someone* had leaked information about her "unnatural" relationship in the first place. Only who, and why?

It had taken Haden Corbett three days to prepare for their trip south to the camp of Shuntaino, but finally everything was ready. They could not arrive in the camp with motorized vehicles, so they would have to pull livestock trailers for *shemath*: nearly hairless, camel-like creatures that stored water in a large hump above the withers as well as in a wide, flat tail that descended nearly to the ground. The shemath would act as their mounts once they'd made their own camp far enough away from that of Shuntaino so as not to offend.

"Rekaya!"

She turned, shaking off the fear and loneliness and unpleasant dreams that had been bothering her since she'd arrived on this planet.

"Good morning, Haden."

The commander put his hand on the small of her back, an intimate gesture, light and sure, a hint of courtship to dispel "rumors." "Toray has arrived. If you're ready, we can leave now."

Rekaya nodded, trying to repress the discomfort Haden's fictional courtship was causing her. She had agreed to the ruse, after all.

She greeted Toray, who was accompanying them as representative of the tribes who welcomed AIC presence on Chepanek, and they and their military escort got into their sand-colored desert vehicles. Rekaya had been surprised at all the soldiers (she'd counted fifteen), but Haden had only said shortly that the situation was unprecedented and it was better to be safe than sorry.

Shuntaino's camp was a drive of about two and a half standard hours south of New Hope. While half of the soldiers set up their own camp in the clearing between flowering yanui and giant jade plants, wide-trunked pines and colorful irella trees, Rekaya, Haden, Toray, and the rest of the soldiers mounted their shemath and made their way southwest through the sparse forest. After riding the slow, heavy beasts for about fifteen standard minutes, they came out onto a broad plain. A herd of usoqua grazed in front of a village of round tents colored in purples and greens and beiges and browns to match the landscape of sand and earth and grass and irella.

Rekaya wiped the sweat from her forehead with the back of her hand and gazed at the scene before her. The beasts resembled any number of bovine breeds on the seeded worlds, such as the *kerskal* of Sherba and the cattle of Earth. But while other seeded planets usually had several species related to those on other planets, Chepanek had only humans and the usoqua. Sometimes, Rekaya wished that she had become an archeologist or anthropologist; the mystery behind where the people of the seeded worlds came from, what their similarities were, how their differences developed, fascinated her.

And, sometimes, she couldn't help wishing she could deal with those differences on a more abstract level.

As they approached the settlement, a number of Chepanek soldiers with long robes and long swords stepped out from between the tents. Haden dismounted and spoke with them rapidly in their native language. Rekaya had studied up on the language for her assignment, but without being able to consult her AI, she understood only a little of the governor's rapid speech. She and Haden and Toray wore AIs disguised as pendants, but she couldn't access hers without revealing that they were violating their promise not to bring any AIC technology to the meeting.

Haden motioned them forward; Rekaya and Toray dismounted, and followed the Chepanek soldiers. They pushed aside the flap of a large sand-colored tent, allowing Rekaya to step through first.

Inside, it was surprisingly cool. As Rekaya's eyes adjusted to the dark, she saw a tall woman flanked by soldiers. Black hair streaked with gray

was tied back in a traditional Chepanek queue, and her intense brown eyes were fixed on Rekaya. For a moment, Rekaya was hardly aware of the rest of their party filing into the tent behind her. She felt her chest contract, and she took a deep breath, the shock of attraction making her feel foolish and at a loss.

Haden stepped forward, introducing her to Shuntaino and breaking the odd, unlikely spell. If the moment had occurred at a cocktail party, among people with whom she shared the same cultural mores, Rekaya would have sworn the attraction was mutual. But this was Chepanek, and Shuntaino was the chieftain of a nomadic tribe that punished homosexuality with banishment, the next best thing to a death sentence in this climate of extremes.

Shuntaino approached Rekaya and draped a pendant around her neck over the AI, a curving pentacle in shades of sand. "We are glad the woman from the stars could find time to speak with us."

"Thank you," Rekaya said in the language of Chepanek, and gave her a gift Haden had deemed appropriate, an armband of silver and gems the color of the auroras.

They settled into the soft pillows strewn around the tent, and a young man served them *manchiluk* wine from a ceramic jug.

"You see the way we live," Shuntaino said, with a sweeping gesture indicating everything in the tent and beyond. "It is a good life. But the presence of your AIC is destroying it. Twice since the people from the stars arrived, we have followed the usoqua herds north, and once followed them south. Each time, when the Rainmakers take the weather with us to a new place, there are fewer who walk with us, fewer who ride the shemath at our sides. Technology" (this was an approximation of the Standard word), "this thing you bring with you, this magic to keep the weather in one place, must leave our world."

"Yours is a good life," Rekaya said in the native language, hoping her memory enhancements would be enough to get her through this without the help of her AI. She had long since noticed that diplomacy was greatly assisted by being able to communicate in the local language without an interpreter. "But if it is change you believe in, is not what AIC brings to Chepanek a great new change? A number of your people see it so. We have brought Chief Toray with us to speak for them."

Toray touched her elbow and spoke low in Standard. "The change my people believe in is the change brought about by the goddess Sasne, and is called by her name, not 'peshun.' " Rekaya was glad she did not have a light complexion that would show the heat she felt rising to her cheeks. "Peshun" was the only word she had known for "change," and so, of course, was the one she had used. "Because it is named for the goddess," Toray continued, " 'unchanging' and 'ungodly' are the same thing."

"Thank you," Rekaya murmured.

Shuntaino cut them off with a gesture. "I have no interest in speaking with the Rainmaker who has sold himself to your AIC," she said. "He no longer follows *Sasne*."

With what Toray had just told her, she understood: he no longer followed change, he no longer followed the goddess. Shuntaino glanced

sternly at Toray before turning back to Rekaya. "Your people bring peshun, yes, but they do not bring the sasne of following the herd, the change of moving with the seasons, the change those of us with the power to speak to the earth know we must follow."

Rekaya felt Toray tense next to her—although spoken to her, the last had been aimed at him. "Our people may yet be able to live here together. Chepanek is vast."

"Not vast enough. Will you remove the ungodly technology before the usoqua herds move south?"

"I do not know when that would be."

"I have spoken to the earth. We must move south before the small moon outdistances the big moon."

Rekaya glanced over at Haden. "That's less than a week from now," he said to her in Standard.

She turned back to Shuntaino. "That is not enough time. We must send news of the results of our meeting back to the Central Committee on Agmir to discuss with them what is to be done."

"You can make no decisions yourself?"

"We must make our decisions together."

"Then I fear your technology must be removed by us."

Rekaya was silent for a moment, trying to comprehend such total unwillingness to negotiate. She took a deep breath. "Your people do not want to go north, mine do not want to go south—if the ultimatum were pushed back, zones could be established in which the presence of AIC could be tolerated."

Shuntaino leaned forward, staring Rekaya straight in the eyes. "Will your people stop stealing my people?" she asked, her voice low.

"Stealing your people?" Rekaya repeated, too surprised to retain her diplomatic cool.

"Yes, stealing them. Taking them away. Showing them a life too easy for them to resist, sending them to foreign worlds."

"We cannot forbid your people to go where they will."

"You cannot make decisions, you cannot promise our people will no longer be stolen—how can you claim to speak for your A.I.C.?"

"Among my people, there are no Rainmakers who have the authority of the earth." She hoped she was using the right terminology this time. "We must discuss the possibilities before we decide."

"Then Chief Rekaya, take this possibility back to your people: the people of Chepanek will no longer be ruled by the Off-Worlders." At that, she rose abruptly, and Rekaya too got to her feet.

"From our camp, I will send a message to my people."

"Good. Then you will come again tomorrow?"

Rekaya nodded, and Shuntaino's soldiers led them out.

On the way back to their camp, she guided her shemath next to that of Haden. "Given the resistance to AIC among tribes like Shuntaino's, have you ever wondered how the planet could have been opened up for colonization?"

He gazed at her as steadily as the bouncing gait of his shemath would allow. "Often."

* * *

If day was the color of shifting sand and pale grass and filled with riddles, night was the color of gems and riddled by mystery. Rekaya once again slept uneasily, dreaming of nomads and curving pentacles and Rainmakers and a chieftain with eyes of earth in rain and hair of night laced with clouds. She awoke feeling less rested than when she had sought her tent the night before, once again uneasy.

It was time to go south, to follow the usoqua herds. What steps would the Traditionalists take? She was only glad that Xi was far away, hopefully safe at Mukotsa Station.

Rekaya draped the pentacle from Shuntaino around her neck, mounted her shemath, and found herself relieved to be traveling in a southerly direction again. She smiled, marveling at how indoctrinated she had become in such a short time.

But when they arrived at the plain again that morning, her relief fled. The camp of Shuntaino was gone.

Haden shook his head, staring at the empty clearing, at the flattened grass where the tents had stood, at the pastures cut clean by the grazing usoqua. "I don't understand. The tribes of Chepanek set great store by keeping their word."

"She did not break her word," Toray said. "She asked us if we would come again, but she did not promise that she would *be* here."

Rekaya nodded. "True. I wonder . . ."

From the direction in which they had come, an explosion shook the earth.

For a frozen moment, they all looked at each other, then Haden pulled out the comm hidden in the woven belt he wore, while Rekaya checked the monitor on her pendant.

"The signal must be garbled. My AI isn't getting anything."

"No response from the camp either," Haden said. "I'll try New Hope." He punched in an I.D. and waited for a moment. "Lasky? Can you hear me? I think our camp was attacked. What? The base stations? Lasky? Lasky?"

"Damn!" He looked like he was tempted to throw his comm in the trampled earth at his feet. "It seems the receiving stations in our area have been destroyed."

He remounted his shemath and turned back in the direction of their camp, Rekaya, Toray, and their small troop of soldiers following. They heard another explosion in the distance as they tried to force their mounts to a gait faster than an amble.

"Stupid beast!" Haden dismounted again and began to run. Rekaya followed suit, drawing the weapon concealed beneath her robes.

Their own camp was about two kilometers from Shuntaino's. Rekaya was not as fast as the commander, but, with effort, she kept up with him, and they arrived in the camp together.

She saw the body of a young guard near one of their blackened ground vehicles, her legs twisted at an unnatural angle, her arms flung above her head. The scent of smoke and death hung in the air.

"It seems they no longer disdain using AIC technology," Rekaya said between pants. She leaned her hands on her knees and tried to catch her breath while she watched him.

He examined the destruction, not answering.

She straightened. "What do you think they did with the rest of the soldiers?"

Haden shook his head. "Let's find out how many dead we have first, shall we?"

In addition to the female guard, they found another casualty on the other side of the camp, near where their tents had stood.

"That makes five soldiers missing," Haden said. His renewed attempts to contact New Hope had been unsuccessful; they were on their own.

"What are we going to do?" Toray asked. Still mounted, the rest had arrived shortly after Haden and Rekaya, Toray at their head; he was obviously better at urging shemath to a run.

"New Hope had our last coordinates," Rekaya said. "Perhaps we should wait." *Without smart suits, without vehicles, without supplies*, she didn't bother to add. That was obvious enough to all of them.

"We have to bury our dead first," Haden said. "We don't know how long it will be before a rescue team gets here, and it will be too hot today to leave the bodies out."

They fashioned shoveling utensils out of scrap metal from the sabotaged vehicles and rods from the tents. The sun was halfway toward the horizon by the time they had laid the two soldiers to rest.

Rekaya leaned her arm on the handle of her makeshift shovel and bent her head while Haden spoke a few words over the graves. Her job had never involved dealing with death before.

When Haden's deep, melancholy voice came to a halt, she shouldered her shovel and headed to where they had tethered the shemath and collected their meager belongings. She found the portable AI unit, and, after checking the location monitor again (still dysfunctional), she settled herself cross-legged in the shade of an irella tree and called up the communications leading to her assignment on Chepanek.

Haden found her playing back a statement by Commander Evans.

"Still no sign of rescue," he said, settling down next to her.

She nodded. "And my locator is still on the blink. Yours?"

He shook his head. "None of them are working. All the nearest base stations must have been destroyed."

"No news from New Hope or Mukotsa Station?" *Xi, where are you? Are you all right?*

"None." The image of the twisted limbs of the dead soldier flashed through Rekaya's mind, and her gut twisted.

She turned off her AI. "What do you know about the background of the Chepanek colonization?"

"A lot. Why?"

"I'm starting to get the impression that my mission was supposed to fail. Do you have any idea why that would be?"

Haden shook his head. "No one could have intended that New Hope be attacked."

Rekaya stood and brushed the dust and grass off her pants. "But what if they hadn't realized it would be? The ultimatum wasn't sent until I was

already in transit. And no one expected them to fight us with our own weapons."

Haden wrapped his arms around his knees and gazed up at her. "True. But why would they want it to fail?"

"To have an excuse to take over the planet?"

"What for? Chepanek has no valuable natural resources to be mined, and, with the extreme seasons, little value as a vacation planet."

Rekaya examined the heavy-leafed trees surrounding them. Now that the rainy reason was almost over, they would soon begin to fold up in preparation for the long, dry summer, and the semi-sandy jungle would become a semi-arid desert. "I don't know. But why send someone with my 'proclivities,' as you so delicately phrased it—*insist* even that I take this assignment? Unless someone wanted me to fail?"

From the direction of what was left of their camp, a series of short, sharp screams rent the air, followed by shots.

Haden and Rekaya turned and ran back to where Lea was crouched in the grass next to Jesimir, who was jerking uncontrollably. Beside them stood Toray, weapon in hand, a scaly, green-and-gray lizard almost a meter long dead at his feet.

"It won't help," Toray said to Lea, who had already begun first aid, tying a salvaged piece of cloth from one of the tents around Jesimir's knee above where the beast had bitten him. "There is no antidote for the poison."

"What's the name of the creature?" Rekaya asked, switching on her AI.

"*Deewuk.*"

Haden laid a hand on her arm. "Rekaya, there really is no antidote that we know yet."

She ignored them and spoke into her pendant. "What can be done against the bite of a deewuk?"

"The medical researchers on the planet of Chepanek have not yet found an antidote," the professional female voice answered her.

The other six soldiers had joined them, and they all looked on as Jesimir's spasms became smaller and smaller and finally stilled altogether.

Lea held his hand tightly, silent tears running down her cheeks.

"The deewuk have already begun to hunt," Toray said quietly. "It is time to go south."

It seemed Toray's command of Standard was slipping now that he was back living under the stars and the auroras of his people.

"Is there anything we can do to make an attack less likely?" Rekaya asked.

"If we camp with the pack animals on the outside, as my people do, when a deewuk springs, it is more likely it will get a shemath than one of us."

"Then that's what we'll do." At the words, she realized that she was taking over command from Haden, but he made no move to stop her.

"First, we have to bury Jesimir," Haden said.

Good. He would be responsible for their dead, and she would be responsible for their living.

* * *

Death and burial had held them up, and, by evening, they had hardly begun to salvage what they could from the ruins of the camp.

"Do you know where the next base station is?" Rekaya asked Haden as she pulled away the torn tarp of a tent in search of whatever treasures she could find: a scorched but intact canteen, a lighter, pencils, rope, a spool of thread, a needle.

Haden looked up from the metal cups he was stacking together. "I checked on the map earlier—it's about halfway between here and New Hope."

"Then if it's not destroyed too, we may be able to reach someone by lunch tomorrow."

Toray put aside a pack he was fashioning from some of the material they had salvaged. "You want to go north tomorrow? Without the magic of your people?"

Rekaya stared at him for a moment, and Lea glanced up from the pile of lightweight metal bars she had pulled out from the tangle of what used to be a tent.

"To go north when the deewuk swarm is to go against nature," he continued, his voice earnest.

"What do you suggest?" Rekaya asked shortly. She too felt a strange reluctance—that damn indoctrination—but they had to get north, had to contact New Hope, had to reach Mukotsa Station. *Xi*.

"Isn't there a base station to the south?" Toray asked.

"Yes, but it's farther away," Haden replied.

Toray took a deep breath and looked at the rest of them. Behind him, the sun dropped below the horizon. "I would like to speak to the earth tomorrow morning, before we leave. Perhaps I can call the weather to take with us, although it is against nature."

Haden and Rekaya looked at each other, and Rekaya shrugged. "Good," Haden said, "After we've made a breakfast for ourselves with whatever we've been able to find, you will speak to the earth, and then we will head north."

Toray didn't look happy, but he nodded.

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They had managed to find some functioning flashlights, and as the sky grew dark, they distributed their finds in even piles beneath the light of the shifting aurora. After a silent meal of salvaged camp rations, they wrapped themselves in their Chepanek robes and settled down around the fire, burning to scare away the night creatures. Tethered in a ring around them were their shemath. Soon Rekaya was dreaming deeply, despite death and burial and fears for Xiheru. Physical exhaustion took its toll.

Then a dream came that was much more vivid than a dream should be, a dream of Shuntaino, next to her on the hard earth of Chepanek, the gray streaks in her midnight black hair reflecting the flickering lights of the aurora.

"Do you understand now?" Shuntaino murmured.

"Understand what?"

"Our way of life."

Rekaya shook her head. "I understand it is hard." She lifted herself up on her elbow and glanced over at the sleeping figure of Haden not far away. "Are you really here?"

"As real as the lights in the night sky."

"That's not much of an answer." Rekaya leaned back again, gazing up at the beautiful, hard woman above her. "Isn't it against nature for you to come north this time of year?"

Shuntaino smiled and touched the swirling pentacle dangling between Rekaya's breasts. "I always go against nature. You saw this."

"Yes."

"This is why you must go against *your* nature and represent us for your people. Your kind must leave our planet before worse happens."

"But I *don't* understand your people. You kill in order to live a life of hardship."

At the word "kill," Shuntaino winced. "No. In order to live a life of change, as the earth dictates."

She rose. "You will understand us yet, Rekaya."

Toray stood on the plain facing south, the direction nature wanted him to go, naked to the waist, a pendant like the one Shuntaino had given Rekaya gracing the dark skin of his nearly hairless chest. He had a long stick in his hand taken from an irella tree, stripped of its leaves, one end whittled to a sharp point. He stood completely still for a moment, obviously gathering himself, as the rest of them watched. The spot he had chosen for speaking to the earth was bare of grass, the dirt slightly sandy, more beige than brown.

After meditating for a few moments, he began to drawn in the dirt with the irella branch, a swirling pentacle like the ones both of them wore. When the design was complete, he stepped to the center and lifted the branch to the sky. The pentacle on his chest seemed to glow.

And the pentacle on Rekaya's chest began to grow hot.

She grabbed the pendant in her fist, staring at the archaic ritual Toray was performing. How could the pendant have a physical reaction?

She hardly noticed as clouds began to gather on the horizon, hardly no-

ticed as she stepped forward, like a sleepwalker, to join Toray in the middle of the pentacle. She had no irella branch, but she lifted her arms parallel with his, calling the weather to them, speaking to the earth. She could feel the energy flowing through her, a pulse, a wave of heat.

She didn't know how long the whole procedure lasted, as the sky grew dark; she only knew she was channeling something. When Toray finally lowered his arms, she collapsed in the middle of the circle behind him.

Toray knelt next to her, lifting her head into his lap. "You did not tell me you were a Rainmaker."

She took a deep breath and opened her eyes again. "I didn't know I was one."

Haden knelt down on her other side. "What was that all about?" His voice sounded angry.

Rekaya still felt light-headed. "I'm a Rainmaker, didn't you hear?"

"That's a Chepanek title. You can't be one."

Toray looked at Haden. "Yes, she can; she has the ability to speak to the earth. I felt it."

Rekaya could see the way that the commander was fighting with himself not to say something derogatory about Toray's beliefs in front of the young chief. Despite his Chepanek robes and his queue, Haden didn't believe in the power of the Rainmakers.

And despite her AIC suits and her short hair, Rekaya did.

She pushed herself up to a sitting position, shaking her head, still dizzy from whatever had just happened to her. "Have you ever witnessed a Rainmaker at work before?" she asked the commander.

"Yes, but only once." He gazed up at what looked like rain clouds on the horizon. "And not with quite such dramatic effects."

"The ambassador is very powerful," Toray said.

"And someone wants to harness this kind of power," Rekaya murmured, gazing at Haden.

"You think. . . ?"

". . . we've found the reason why this planet is so valuable, why AIC wants my mission to fail, why they want an excuse to be able to operate here unhindered. Until now, psychotronic energy has been little more than a theory." She turned back to Toray. "Have you ever worked with Dr. Nebel on his research project?"

The Rainmaker nodded. "He said I was a very good subject. He would like to send me to Agmir."

She and Haden stared at each other. "Stealing their people," he murmured.

"Help me up, please," Rekaya said. "I still feel a bit dizzy." With Haden holding one elbow and Toray holding the other, she stood, and put a hand to her forehead as the ground seemed to shift beneath her.

"It will get better with time," Toray said. "When I first began to speak to the earth, I too could not stand up again after."

Rekaya nodded, staring to the south—the direction Shuntaino had gone. And Xi was somewhere to the north, somewhere Rekaya could not reach, perhaps a victim of a Traditionalist attack, and, if not, worrying that there was no word.

But if the Traditionalist attacks continued, AIC would send in its troops and take over the planet completely, to mine its human potential.

She gripped Haden's hand and took a deep breath. "We must go south, try to find Shuntaino before more damage is done."

For a moment, Haden didn't answer. "There is a distinct possibility that they may want to assassinate us."

"They could have done that yesterday, but instead they attacked our camp." She suppressed the image of the twisted body of the first soldier they had found. Could she really negotiate with people who would not even stop at murder? With a social system so intolerant that she herself would have been a victim of it? Would it be so bad if AIC took over the planet?

Yes, it would. There was such a thing as playing fair, after all, and AIC had not done so, had pretended to be interested in negotiations, but had assumed from the very beginning that negotiations would not be successful.

With such a one as herself leading them.

There was only one thing that the Foreign Worlds Service had not reckoned with—that Rekaya would prove to be a Rainmaker.

"I had not expected to see you again," Shuntaino said. The chieftain with eyes of earth in rain gazed at Rekaya. There was caution there, but no murder.

"Did you know I was a Rainmaker?" Rekaya asked.

"I felt something, but I was unsure. It could have been the one who has turned away from the earth."

"Will you listen to me now?"

Shuntaino raised her chin and pushed a strand of graying, night-black hair away from her temple. "Why is now different than before? You are still one of those who speak for your A.I.C."

Rekaya inclined her head respectfully. "But now I understand your ways better, and I beg you to allow me to help you save them."

"We can save our ways ourselves."

She looked past the chief's shoulder at the swirling pentacle on the wall of the tent. "I mean no disrespect, but I am afraid you cannot. I understand now why your people are being stolen, and there are those who will listen to me. But only if no more blood is spilled."

Shuntaino shook her head. "You listen to me only because blood *has* been spilled."

Rekaya was silent for a moment. How could she persuade this proud woman? Would it be too daring to refer to what she was sure they had both felt? There was little to lose.

She gazed straight into Shuntaino's dark eyes, calling that awareness from her. "That is not true," she said quietly. "I know you understand the truth of my soul, and I tell you now, I listen to you because I have spoken to the earth and I understand what it means."

Shuntaino gazed at her for a long moment, and wisps of dreams spirited through Rekaya's mind.

The rebel leader leaned forward. "Then tell me how I can save Chepanek." ○

SISTER DARK

I speak and frogs and toads
like muscle-sprung tongues
from my mouth come bounding
lively as a lover's kiss
as obscene, as secret
as shamelessly revealed

remember diamonds
are harder than everything
and cut stone

and salamanders and efts
deft as a magician's nervous hands
fire cupped in damp skin
transmuting water (is breath is life
and death to flame) paradox more subtle
than phoenix risen

remember rubies
are red, but are not blood
nor impure wine

and snakes and lizards
like beaded purses rich
with beating hearts, or string
for spinal bones, or the line
that binds to body's dance
the mind.

remember pearls
are dead things reft
of living flesh

—Holly Phillips

THE LITTLE GODDESS

Ian McDonald

Ian McDonald, who has lived in Northern Ireland for most of his life, works in program development for an independent television production company. His most recent book is *River of Gods,* from Simon and Schuster (UK). The novel is set in a kaleidoscopic India one hundred years after independence. He tells us, "It was while researching *River,* on a side-trip up into Nepal, that I first encountered, and was fascinated by, the Kumari Devi."

I remember the night I became a goddess.

The men collected me from the hotel at sunset. I was light-headed with hunger, for the child-assessors said I must not eat on the day of the test. I had been up since dawn; the washing and dressing and making up were a long and tiring business. My parents bathed my feet in the bidet. We had never seen such a thing before and that seemed the natural use for it. None of us had ever stayed in a hotel. We thought it most grand, though I see now that it was a budget tourist chain. I remember the smell of onions cooking in *ghee* as I came down in the elevator. It smelled like the best food in the world.

I know the men must have been priests but I cannot remember if they wore formal dress. My mother cried in the lobby; my father's mouth was pulled in and he held his eyes wide, in that way that grown-ups do when they want to cry but cannot let tears be seen. There were two other girls for the test staying in the same hotel. I did not know them; they were from other villages where the *devi* could live. Their parents wept unashamedly. I could not understand it; their daughters might be goddesses.

On the street, rickshaw drivers and pedestrians hooted and waved at us with our red robes and third eyes on our foreheads. The *devi*, the *devi*

look! Best of all fortune! The other girls held on tight to the men's hands. I lifted my skirts and stepped into the car with the darkened windows.

They took us to the Hanumandhoka. Police and machines kept the people out of the Durbar Square. I remember staring long at the machines, with their legs like steel chickens' and naked blades in their hands. The King's Own fighting machines. Then I saw the temple and its great roofs sweeping up and up and up into the red sunset and I thought for one instant the upturned eaves were bleeding.

The room was long and dim and stuffily warm. Low evening light shone in dusty rays through cracks and slits in the carved wood; so bright it almost burned. Outside you could hear the traffic and the bustle of tourists. The walls seemed thin but at the same time kilometers thick. Durbar Square was a world away. The room smelled of brassy metal. I did not recognize it then but I know it now as the smell of blood. Beneath the blood was another smell, of time piled thick as dust. One of the two women who would be my guardians if I passed the test told me the temple was five hundred years old. She was a short, round woman with a face that always seemed to be smiling, but when you looked closely you saw it was not. She made us sit on the floor on red cushions while the men brought the rest of the girls. Some of them were crying already. When there were ten of us the two women left and the door was closed. We sat for a long time in the heat of the long room. Some of the girls fidgeted and chattered but I gave all my attention to the wall carvings and soon I was lost. It has always been easy for me to lose myself; in Shakya I could disappear for hours in the movement of clouds across the mountain, in the ripple of the grey river far below, and the flap of the prayer banner in the wind. My parents saw it as a sign of my inborn divinity, one of the thirty-two that mark those girls in whom the goddess may dwell.

In the failing light I read the story of Jayaprakash Malla playing dice with the *devi* Taleju Bhawani who came to him in the shape of a red snake and left with the vow that she would only return to the Kings of Kathmandu as a virgin girl of low caste, to spite their haughtiness. I could not read its end in the darkness, but I did not need to. I was its end, or one of the other nine low-caste girls in the god-house of the *devi*.

Then the doors burst open wide and firecrackers exploded and through the rattle and smoke red demons leaped into the hall. Behind them men in crimson beat pans and clappers and bells. At once two of the girls began to cry and the two women came and took them away. But I knew the monsters were just silly men. In masks. These were not even close to demons. I have seen demons, after the rain clouds when the light comes low down the valley and all the mountains leap up as one. Stone demons, kilometers high. I have heard their voices, and their breath does not smell like onions. The silly men danced close to me, shaking their red manes and red tongues, but I could see their eyes behind the painted holes and they were afraid of me.

Then the door banged open again with another crash of fireworks and more men came through the smoke. They carried baskets draped with red sheets. They set them in front of us and whipped away the coverings.

Buffalo heads, so freshly struck off the blood was bright and glossy. Eyes rolled up, lolling tongues still warm, noses still wet. And the flies, swarming around the severed neck. A man pushed a basket towards me on my cushion as if it were a dish of holy food. The crashing and beating outside rose to a roar, so loud and metallic it hurt. The girl from my own Shakya village started to wail; the cry spread to another and then another, then a fourth. The other woman, the tall pinched one with a skin like an old purse, came in to take them out, carefully lifting her gown so as not to trail it in the blood. The dancers whirled around like flame and the kneeling man lifted the buffalo head from the basket. He held it up in my face, eye to eye, but all I thought was that it must weigh a lot; his muscles stood out like vines, his arm shook. The flies looked like black jewels. Then there was a clap from outside and the men set down the heads and covered them up with their cloths and they left with the silly demon men whirling and leaping around them.

There was one other girl left on her cushion now. I did not know her. She was of a Vajryana family from Niwar down the valley. We sat a long time, wanting to talk but not knowing if silence was part of the trial. Then the door opened a third time and two men led a white goat into the *devi* hall. They brought it right between me and the Niwari girl. I saw its wicked, slotted eye roll. One held the goat's tether, the other took a big ceremonial *kukri* from a leather sheath. He blessed it and with one fast strong stroke sent the goat's head leaping from its body.

I almost laughed, for the goat looked so funny, its body not knowing where its head was, the head looking around for the body and then the body realizing that it had no head and going down with a kick, and why was the Niwari girl screaming, couldn't she see how funny it was, or was she screaming because I saw the joke and she was jealous of that? Whatever her reason, smiling woman and weathered woman came and took her very gently away and the two men went down on their knees in the spreading blood and kissed the wooden floor. They lifted away the two parts of the goat. I wished they hadn't done that. I would have liked someone with me in the big wooden hall. But I was on my own in the heat and the dark and then, over the traffic, I heard the deep-voiced bells of Kathmandu start to swing and ring. For the last time the doors opened and there were the women, in the light.

"Why have you left me all alone?" I cried. "What have I done wrong?"

"How could you do anything wrong, goddess?" said the old, wrinkled woman who, with her colleague, would become my mother and father and teacher and sister. "Now come along with us and hurry. The King is waiting."

Smiling Kumarima and Tall Kumarima (as I would now have to think of them) took a hand each and led me, skipping, from the great looming Hanuman temple. A road of white silk had been laid from the foot of the temple steps to a wooden palace close by. The people had been let into the square and they pressed on either side of the processional way, held back by the police and the King's robots. The machines held burning torches in their grasping hands. Fire glinted from their killing blades. There was great silence in the dark square.

"Your home, goddess," said Smiling Kumarima, bending low to whisper in my ear. "Walk the silk, *devi*. Do not stray off it. I have your hand, you will be safe with me."

I walked between my Kumarimas, humming a pop tune I had heard on the radio at the hotel. When I looked back I saw that I had left two lines of bloody footprints.

You have no caste, no village, no home. This palace is your home, and who would wish for any other? We have made it lovely for you, for you will only leave it six times a year. Everything you need is here within these walls.

You have no mother or father. How can a goddess have parents? Nor have you brothers and sisters. The King is your brother, the kingdom your sister. The priests who attend on you, they are nothing. We your Kumarimas are less than nothing. Dust, dirt, a tool. You may say anything and we must obey it.

As we have said, you will leave the palace only six times a year. You will be carried in a palanquin. Oh, it is a beautiful thing, carved wood and silk. Outside this palace you shall not touch the ground. The moment you touch the ground, you cease to be divine.

You will wear red, with your hair in a topknot and your toe- and fingernails painted. You will carry the red *tilak* of Siva on your forehead. We will help you with your preparations until they become second nature.

You will speak only within the confines of your palace, and little even then. Silence becomes the Kumari. You will not smile or show any emotion.

You will not bleed. Not a scrape, not a scratch. The power is in the blood and when the blood leaves, the *devi* leaves. On the day of your first blood, even one single drop, we will tell the priest and he will inform the King that the goddess has left. You will no longer be divine and you will leave this palace and return to your family. You will not bleed.

You have no name. You are Taleju, you are Kumari. You are the goddess.

These instructions my two Kumarimas whispered to me as we walked between kneeling priests to the King in his plumed crown of diamonds and emeralds and pearls. The King *namasted* and we sat side by side on lion thrones and the long hall throbbed to the bells and drums of Durbar Square. I remember thinking that a King must bow to me but there are rules even for goddesses.

Smiling Kumarima and Tall Kumarima. I draw Tall Kumarima in my memory first, for it is right to give pre-eminence to age. She was almost as tall as a Westerner and thin as a stick in a drought. At first I was scared of her. Then I heard her voice and could never be scared again; her voice was kind as a singing bird. When she spoke you felt you now knew everything. Tall Kumarima lived in a small apartment above a tourist shop on the edge of Durbar Square. From her window she could see my Kumari Ghar, among the stepped towers of the *dhokas*. Her husband had died of lung cancer from pollution and cheap Indian cigarettes. Her two tall sons were grown and married with children of their own, older than me. In that time she had mothered five Kumari *Devi*s before me.

Next I remember Smiling Kumarima. She was short and round and had breathing problems for which she used inhalers, blue and brown. I would hear the snake hiss of them on days when Durbar Square was golden with smog. She lived out in the new suburbs up on the western hills, a long journey even by the royal car at her service. Her children were twelve, ten, nine, and seven. She was jolly and treated me like her fifth baby, the young favorite, but I felt even then that, like the demon-dancing-men, she was scared of me. Oh, it was the highest honor any woman could hope for, to be the mother of the goddess—so to speak—though you wouldn't think it to hear her neighbors in the unit, *shutting yourself away in that dreadful wooden box, and all the blood, medieval, medieval,* but they couldn't understand. Somebody had to keep the king safe against those who would turn us into another India, or worse, China; someone had to preserve the old ways of the divine kingdom. I understood early that difference between them. Smiling Kumarima was my mother out of duty. Tall Kumarima from love.

I never learned their true names. Their rhythms and cycles of shifts waxed and waned through the days and nights like the faces of the moon. Smiling Kumarima once found me looking up through the lattice of a *jali* screen at the fat moon on a rare night when the sky was clear and healthy and shouted me away, *don't be looking at that thing, it will càll the blood out of you, little devi, and you will be the devi no more.*

Within the wooden walls and iron rules of my Kumari Ghar, years become indistinguishable, indistinct. I think now I was five when I became Taleju *Devi*. The year, I believe, was 2034. But some memories break the surface, like flowers through snow.

Monsoon rain on the steep-sloped roofs, water rushing and gurgling through the gutters, and the shutter that every year blew loose and rattled in the wind. We had monsoons, then. Thunder demons in the mountains around the city, my room flash lit with lightning. Tall Kumarima came to see if I needed singing to sleep but I was not afraid. A goddess cannot fear a storm.

The day I went walking in the little garden, when Smiling Kumarima let out a cry and fell at my feet on the grass and the words to tell her to get up, not to worship me were on my lips when she held, between thumb and forefinger, twisting and writhing and trying to find a place for its mouth to seize: a green leech.

The morning Tall Kumarima came to tell me people had asked me to show myself. At first I had thought it wonderful that people would want to come and look at me on my little *jharoka* balcony in my clothes and paint and jewels. Now I found it tiresome; all those round eyes and gaping mouths. It was a week after my tenth birthday. I remember Tall Kumarima smiled but tried not to let me see. She took me to the *jharoka* to wave to the people in the court and I saw a hundred Chinese faces upturned to me, then the high, excited voices. I waited and waited but two tourists would not go away. They were an ordinary couple, dark local faces, country clothes.

"Why are they keeping us waiting?" I asked.

"Wave to them," Tall Kumarima urged. "That is all they want." The

woman saw my lifted hand first. She went weak and grabbed her husband by the arm. The man bent to her, then looked up at me. I read many emotions on that face; shock, confusion, recognition, revulsion, wonder, hope. Fear. I waved and the man tugged at his wife, *look, look up*. I remember that against all the laws, I smiled. The woman burst into tears. The man made to call out but Tall Kumarima hastened me away.

"Who were those funny people?" I asked. "They were both wearing very white shoes."

"Your mother and father," Tall Kumarima said. As she led me down the Durga corridor with the usual order not to brush my free hand along the wooden walls for fear of splinters, I felt her grip tremble.

That night I dreamed the dream of my life, that is not a dream but one of my earliest experiences, knocking and knocking and knocking at the door of my remembering. This was a memory I would not admit in daylight, so it must come by night, to the secret door.

I am in the cage over a ravine. A river runs far below, milky with mud and silt, foaming cream over the boulders and slabs sheared from the mountainsides. The cable spans the river from my home to the summer grazing and I sit in the wire cage used to carry the goats across the river. At my back is the main road, always loud with trucks, the prayer banners and Kinley bottled water sign of my family's roadside teahouse. My cage still sways from my uncle's last kick. I see him, arms and legs wrapped around the wire, grinning his gap-toothed grin. His face is summer-burned brown, his hands cracked and stained from the trucks he services. Oil engrained in the creases. He wrinkles up his nose at me and unhooks a leg to kick my cage forward on its pulley-wheel. Pulley sways cable sways mountains, sky and river sway but I am safe in my little goat-cage. I have been kicked across this ravine many times. My uncle inches forward. Thus we cross the river, by kicks and inches.

I never see what strikes him—some thing of the brain perhaps, like the sickness Lowlanders get when they go up to the high country. But the next I look my uncle is clinging to the wire by his right arm and leg. His left arm and leg hang down, shaking like a cow with its throat cut, shaking the wire and my little cage. I am three years old and I think this is funny, a trick my uncle is doing just for me, so I shake back, bouncing my cage, bouncing my uncle up and down, up and down. Half his body will not obey him and he tries to move forward by sliding his leg along, like *this*, jerk his hand forward *quick* so he never loses grip of the wire, and all the while bouncing up and down, up and down. Now my uncle tries to shout but his words are noise and slobber because half his face is paralyzed. Now I see his fingers lose their grip on the wire. Now I see him spin round and his hooked leg come free. Now he falls away, half his body reaching, half his mouth screaming. I see him fall, I see him bounce from the rocks and cartwheel, a thing I have always wished I could do. I see him go into the river and the brown water swallow him.

My older brother came out with a hook and a line and hauled me in. When my parents found I was not shrieking, not a sob or a tear or even a pout, that was when they knew I was destined to become the goddess. I was smiling in my wire cage.

* * *

I remember best the festivals, for it was only then that I left the Kumari Ghar. Dasain, at the end of summer, was the greatest. For eight days the city ran red. On the final night I lay awake listening to the voices in the square flow together into one roar, the way I imagined the sea would sound, the voices of the men gambling for the luck of Lakshmi, *devi* of wealth. My father and uncles had gambled on the last night of Dasain. I remember I came down and demanded to know what all the laughing was about and they turned away from their cards and really laughed. I had not thought there could be so many coins in the world as there were on that table but it was nothing compared to Kathmandu on the eighth of Dasain. Smiling Kumarima told me it took some of the priests all year to earn back what they lost. Then came the ninth day, the great day and I sailed out from my palace for the city to worship me.

I traveled on a litter carried by forty men strapped to bamboo poles as thick as my body. They went gingerly, testing every step, for the streets were slippery. Surrounded by gods and priests and *saddhus* mad with holiness, I rode on my golden throne. Closer to me than any were my Kumarimas, my two Mothers, so splendid and ornate in their red robes and headdresses and make-up they did not look like humans at all. But Tall Kumarima's voice and Smiling Kumarima's smile assured me as I rode with Hanuman and Taleju through the cheering and the music and the banners bright against the blue sky and the smell I now recognized from the night I became a goddess, the smell of blood.

That Dasain the city received me as never before. The roar of the night of Lakshmi continued into the day. As Taleju *Devi* I was not supposed to notice anything as low as humans but out of the corners of my painted eyes I could see beyond the security robots stepping in time with my bearers, and the streets radiating out from the *stupa* of Chhetrapati were solid with bodies. They threw jets and gushes of water from plastic bottles up into the air, glittering, breaking into little rainbows, raining down on them, soaking them, but they did not care. Their faces were crazy with devotion.

Tall Kumarima saw my puzzlement and bent to whisper.

"They do *puja* for the rain. The monsoon has failed a second time, *devi*."

As I spoke, Smiling Kumarima fanned me so no one would see my lips move. "We don't like the rain," I said firmly.

"A goddess cannot do only what she likes," Tall Kumarima said. "It is a serious matter. The people have no water. The rivers are running dry."

I thought of the river that ran far down deep below the house where I was born, the water creamy and gushing and flecked with yellow foam. I saw it swallow my uncle and could not imagine it ever becoming thin, weak, hungry.

"So why do they throw water then?" I asked.

"So the *devi* will give them more," Smiling Kumarima explained. But I could not see the sense in that even for goddesses and I frowned, trying to understand how humans were and so I was looking right at him when he came at me.

He had city-pale skin and hair parted on the left that flopped as he

dived out of the crowd. He moved his fists to the collar of his diagonally striped shirt and people surged away from him. I saw him hook his thumbs into two loops of black string. I saw his mouth open in a great cry. Then the machine swooped and I saw a flash of silver. The young man's head flew up into the air. His mouth and eyes went round: from a cry to an oh! The King's Own machine had sheathed its blade, like a boy folding a knife, before the body, like that funny goat in the Hanumandhoka, realized it was dead and fell to the ground. The crowd screamed and tried to get away from the headless thing. My bearers rocked, swayed, uncertain where to go, what to do. For a moment I thought they might drop me.

Smiling Kumarima let out little shrieks of horror, "Oh! Oh! Oh!" My face was spotted with blood.

"It's not hers," Tall Kumarima shouted. "It's not hers!" She moistened a handkerchief with a lick of saliva. She was gently wiping the young man's blood from my face when the Royal security in their dark suits and glasses arrived, beating through the crowd. They lifted me, stepped over the body and carried me to the waiting car.

"You smudged my make-up," I said to the Royal guard as the car swept away. Worshippers barely made it out of our way in the narrow alleys.

Tall Kumarima came to my room that night. The air was loud with helicopters, quartering the city for the plotters. Helicopters, and machines like the King's Own robots, that could fly and look down on Kathmandu with the eyes of a hawk. She sat on my bed and laid a little transparent blue box on the red and gold embroidered coverlet. In it were two pale pills.

"To help you sleep."

I shook my head. Tall Kumarima folded the blue box into the sleeve of her robe.

"Who was he?"

"A fundamentalist. A *karsevak*. A foolish, sad young man."

"A Hindu, but he wanted to hurt us."

"That is the madness of it, *devi*. He and his kind think our kingdom has grown too western, too far from its roots and religious truths."

"And he attacks us, the Taleju *Devi*. He would have blown up his own goddess, but the machine took his head. That is almost as strange as people throwing water to the rain."

Tall Kumarima bowed her head. She reached inside the sash of her robe and took out a second object which she set on my heavy cover with the same precise care as she had the sleeping pills. It was a light, fingerless glove, for the right hand; clinging to its back was a curl of plastic shaped like a very very tiny goat fetus.

"Do you know what this is?"

I nodded. Every devotee doing *puja* in the streets seemed to own one, right hands held up to snatch my image. A palmer.

"It sends messages into your head," I whispered.

"That is the least of what it can do, *devi*. Think of it like your *jharoka*, but this window opens onto the world beyond Durbar Square, beyond Kathmandu and Nepal. It is an aeai, an artificial intelligence, a thinking-

thing, like the machines up there, but much cleverer than them. They are clever enough to fly and hunt and not much else, but this aeai can tell you anything you want to know. All you have to do is ask. And there are things you need to know, *devi*. You will not be Kumari forever. The day will come when you will leave your palace and go back to the world. I have seen them before you." She reached out to take my face between her hands, then drew back. "You are special, my *devi*, but the kind of special it takes to be Kumari means you will find it hard in the world. People will call it a sickness. Worse than that, even . . ."

She banished the emotion by gently fitting the fetus-shaped receiver behind my ear. I felt the plastic move against my skin, then Tall Kumarima slipped on the glove, waved her hand in a *mudra* and I heard her voice inside my head. Glowing words appeared in the air between us, words I had been painstakingly taught to read by Tall Kumarima.

Don't let anyone find it, her dancing hand said. *Tell no one, not even Smiling Kumarima. I know you call her that, but she would not understand. She would think it was unclean, a pollution. In some ways, she is not so different from that man who tried to harm you. Let this be our secret, just you and me.*

Soon after, Smiling Kumarima came to look in on me and check for fleas, but I pretended to be asleep. The glove and the fetus-thing were hidden under my pillow. I imagined them talking to me through the goose down and soft soft cotton, sending dreams while the helicopters and hunting robots wheeled in the night above me. When the latch on her door clicked too, I put on the glove and earhook and went looking for the lost rain. I found it one hundred and fifty kilometers up, through the eye of a weather aeai spinning over east India. I saw the monsoon, a coil of cloud like a cat's claw hooking up across the sea. There had been cats in the village; suspicious things lean on mice and barley. No cat was permitted in the Kumari Ghar. I looked down on my kingdom but I could not see a city or a palace or me down here at all. I saw mountains, white mountains ridged with grey and blue ice. I was goddess of this. And the heart went out of me, because it was nothing, a tiny crust of stone on top of that huge world that hung beneath it like the full teat of a cow, rich and heavy with people and their brilliant cities and their bright nations. India, where our gods and names were born.

Within three days the police had caught the plotters and it was raining. The clouds were low over Kathmandu. The color ran from the temples in Durbar Square but people beat tins and metal cups in the muddy streets calling praise on the Taleju *Devi*.

"What will happen to them?" I asked Tall Kumarima. "The bad men."

"They will likely be hanged," she said.

That autumn after the executions of the traitors the dissatisfaction finally poured on to the streets like sacrificial blood. Both sides claimed me: police and demonstrators. Others yet held me up as both the symbol of all that was good with our Kingdom and also everything wrong with it. Tall Kumarima tried to explain it to me but with my world mad and dangerous my attention was turned elsewhere, to the huge, old land to the south, spread out like a jeweled skirt. In such a time it was easy to be se-

duced by the terrifying depth of its history, by the gods and warriors who swept across it, empire after empire after empire. My kingdom had always been fierce and free but I met the men who liberated India from the Last Empire—men like gods—and saw that liberty broken up by rivalry and intrigue and corruption into feuding states; Awadh and Bharat, the United States of Bengal, Maratha, Karnataka.

Legendary names and places. Shining cities as old as history. There aeais haunted the crowded streets like *gandhavas*. There men outnumbered women four to one. There the old distinctions were abandoned and women married as far up and men as few steps down the tree of caste as they could. I became as enthralled by their leaders and parties and politics as any of their citizens by the aeai-generated soaps they loved so dearly. My spirit was down in India in that early, hard winter when the police and King's machines restored the old order to the city beyond Durbar Square. Unrest in earth and the three heavens. One day I woke to find snow in the wooden court; the roofs of the temple of Durbar Square heavy with it, like frowning, freezing old men. I knew now that the strange weather was not my doing but the result of huge, slow changes in the climate. Smiling Kumarima came to me in my *jharoka* as I watched flakes thick and soft as ash sift down from the white sky. She knelt before me, rubbed her hands together inside the cuffs of her wide sleeves. She suffered badly in the cold and damp.

"*Devi*, are you not one of my own children to me?"

I waggled my head, not wanting to say yes.

"*Devi*, have I ever, ever given you anything but my best?"

Like her counterpart a season before, she drew a plastic pillbox from her sleeve, set it on her palm. I sat back on my chair, afraid of it as I had never been afraid of anything Tall Kumarima offered me.

"I know how happy we are all here, but change must always happen. Change in the world, like this snow—unnatural, *devi,* not right—change in our city. And we are not immune to it in here, my flower. Change will come to you, *devi*. To you, to your body. You will become a woman. If I could, I would stop it happening to you, *devi*. But I can't. No one can. What I can offer is . . . a delay. A stay. Take these. They will slow down the changes. For years, hopefully. Then we can all be happy here together, *devi*." She looked up from her deferential half-bow, into my eyes. She smiled. "Have I ever wanted anything but the best for you?"

I held out my hand. Smiling Kumarima tipped the pills into my palm. I closed my fist and slipped from my carved throne. As I went to my room, I could hear Smiling Kumarima chanting prayers of thanksgiving to the goddesses in the carvings. I looked at the pills in my hand. Blue seemed such a wrong color. Then I filled my cup in my little washroom and washed them down, two gulps, down, down.

After that they came every day, two pills, blue as the Lord Krishna, appearing as miraculously on my bedside table. For some reason I never told Tall Kumarima, even when she commented on how fractious I was becoming, how strangely inattentive and absent-minded at ceremonies. I told her it was the *devi*s in the walls, whispering to me. I knew enough of my specialness, that others have called my *disorder*, that that would be

unquestioned. I was tired and lethargic that winter. My sense of smell grew keen to the least odor and the people in my courtyard with their stupid, beaming upturned faces infuriated me. I went for weeks without showing myself. The wooden corridors grew sharp and brassy with old blood. With the insight of demons, I can see now that my body was a chemical battlefield between my own hormones and Smiling Kumarima's puberty suppressants. It was a heavy, humid spring that year and I felt huge and bloated in the heat, a waddling bulb of fluids under my robes and waxy make-up. I started to drop the little blue pills down the commode. I had been Kumari for seven Dasains.

I had thought I would feel like I used to, but I did not. It was not unwell, like the pills had made me feel, it was sensitive, acutely conscious of my body. I would lie in my wooden bed and feel my legs growing longer. I became very very aware of my tiny nipples. The heat and humidity got worse, or so it seemed to me.

At any time I could have opened my palmer and asked it what was happening to me, but I didn't. I was scared that it might tell me it was the end of my divinity.

Tall Kumarima must have noticed that the hem of my gown no longer brushed the floorboards but it was Smiling Kumarima drew back in the corridor as we hurried towards the *darshan* hall, hesitated a moment, said, softly, smiling as always,

"How you're growing, *devi*. Are you still. . . ? No, forgive me, of course. . . . Must be this warm weather we're having, makes children shoot up like weeds. My own are bursting out of everything they own, nothing will fit them."

The next morning as I was dressing a tap came on my door, like the scratch of a mouse or the click of an insect.

"Devi?"

No insect, no mouse. I froze, palmer in hand, earhook babbling the early morning news reports from Awadh and Bharat into my head.

"We are dressing."

"Yes, *devi*, that is why I would like to come in."

I just managed to peel off the palmer and stuff it under my mattress before the heavy door swung open on its pivot.

"We have been able to dress ourselves since we were six," I retorted.

"Yes, indeed," said Smiling Kumarima, smiling. "But some of the priests have mentioned to me a little laxness in the ritual dress."

I stood in my red and gold night-robe, stretched out my arms and turned, like one of the trance-dancers I saw in the streets from my litter. Smiling Kumarima sighed.

"Devi, you know as well as I . . ."

I pulled my gown up over my head and stood unclothed, daring her to look, to search my body for signs of womanhood.

"See?" I challenged.

"Yes," Smiling Kumarima said, "but what is that behind your ear?"

She reached to pluck the hook. It was in my fist in a flick.

"Is that what I think it is?" Smiling Kumarima said, soft smiling bulk filling the space between the door and me. "Who gave you that?"

"It is ours," I declared in my most commanding voice but I was a naked twelve-year-old caught in wrongdoing and that commands less than dust.

"Give it to me."

I clenched my fist tighter.

"We are a goddess, you cannot command us."

"A goddess is as a goddess acts and right now, you are acting like a brat. Show me."

She was a mother, I was her child. My fingers unfolded. Smiling Kumarima recoiled as if I held a poisonous snake. To her eyes of her faith, I did.

"Pollution," she said faintly. "Spoiled, all spoiled. Her voice rose. "I know who gave you this!" Before my fingers could snap shut, she snatched the coil of plastic from my palm. She threw the earhook to the floor as if it burned her. I saw the hem of her skirt raise, I saw the heel come down, but it was my world, my oracle, my window on the beautiful. I dived to rescue the tiny plastic fetus. I remember no pain, no shock, not even Smiling Kumarima's shriek of horror and fear as her heel came down, but I will always see the tip of my right index finger burst in a spray of red blood.

The *pallav* of my yellow sari flapped in the wind as I darted through the Delhi evening crush-hour. Beating the heel of his hand off his buzzer, the driver of the little wasp-colored *phatphat* cut in between a lumbering truck-train painted with gaudy gods and *apsaras* and a cream Government Maruti and pulled into the great *chakra* of traffic around Connaught Place. In Awadh you drive with your ears. The roar of horns and klaxons and cycle-rickshaw bells assailed from all sides at once. It rose before the dawn birds and only fell silent well after midnight. The driver skirted a *saddhu* walking through the traffic as calmly as if he were wading through the Holy Yamuna. His body was white with sacred ash, a mourning ghost, but his Siva trident burned blood red in the low sun. I had thought Kathmandu dirty, but Delhi's golden light and incredible sunsets spoke of pollution beyond even that. Huddled in the rear seat of the autorickshaws with Deepti, I wore a smog mask and goggles to protect my delicate eye make-up. But the fold of my sari flapped over my shoulder in the evening wind and the little silver bells jingled.

There were six in our little fleet. We accelerated along the wide avenues of the British Raj, past the sprawling red buildings of old India, toward the glass spires of Awadh. Black kites circled the towers, scavengers, pickers of the dead. We turned beneath cool *neem* trees into the drive of a government bungalow. Burning torches lit us to the pillared porch. House staff in Rajput uniforms escorted us to the *shaadi* marquee.

Mamaji had arrived before any of us. She fluttered and fretted among her birds; a lick, a rub, a straightening, an admonition. "Stand up stand up, we'll have no slumping here. My girls will be the bonniest at this *shaadi*, hear me?" Shweta, her bony, mean-mouthed assistant, collected our smog-masks. "Now girls, palmers ready." We knew the drill with almost military smartness. Hand up, glove on, rings on, hook behind ear

jewelry, decorously concealed by the fringed *dupattas* draped over our heads. "We are graced with Awadh's finest tonight. Crème de la crème." I barely blinked as the résumés rolled up my inner vision. "Right girls, from the left, first dozen, two minutes each then on to the next down the list. Quick smart!" Mamaji clapped her hands and we formed a line. A band struck a medley of musical numbers from *Town and Country*, the soap opera that was a national obsession in sophisticated Awadh. There we stood, twelve little wives-a-waiting while the Rajput servants hauled up the rear of the pavilion.

Applause broke around us like rain. A hundred men stood in a rough semi-circle, clapping enthusiastically, faces bright in the light from the carnival lanterns.

When I arrived in Awadh, the first thing I noticed was the people. People pushing people begging people talking people rushing past each other without a look or a word or an acknowledgement. I had thought Kathmandu held more people than a mind could imagine. I had not seen Old Delhi. The constant noise, the everyday callousness, the lack of any respect appalled me. You could vanish into that crowd of faces like a drop of rain into a tank. The second thing I noticed was that the faces were all men. It was indeed as my palmer had whispered to me. There were four men for every woman.

Fine men good men clever men rich men, men of ambition and career and property, men of power and prospects. Men with no hope of ever marrying within their own class and caste. Men with little prospect of marrying ever. *Shaadi* had once been the word for wedding festivities, the groom on his beautiful white horse, so noble, the bride shy and lovely behind her golden veil. Then it became a name for dating agencies: *lovely wheat-complexioned Agarwal, U.S.-university MBA, seeks same civil service/military for matrimonials*. Now it was a bride-parade, a marriage-market for lonely men with large dowries. Dowries that paid a hefty commission to the Lovely Girl *Shaadi* Agency.

The Lovely Girls lined up on the left side of the Silken Wall that ran the length of the bungalow garden. The first twelve men formed up on the right. They plumped and preened in their finery but I could see they were nervous. The partition was no more than a row of saris pinned to a line strung between plastic uprights, fluttering in the rising evening wind. A token of decorum. Purdah. They were not even silk.

Reshmi was first to walk and talk the Silken Wall. She was a Yadav country girl from Uttaranchal, big-handed and big-faced. A peasant's daughter. She could cook and sew and sing, do household accounts, manage both domestic aeais and human staff. Her first prospective was a weasely man with a weak jaw in government whites and a Nehru cap. He had bad teeth. Never good. Any one of us could have told him he was wasting his *shaadi* fee, but they *namasted* to each other and stepped out, regulation three paces between them. At the end of the walk Reshmi would loop back to rejoin the tail of the line and meet her next prospective. On big *shaadis* like this my feet would bleed by the end of the night. Red footprints on the marble floors of Mamaji's courtyard *haveli*.

I stepped out with Ashok, a big globe of a thirty-two-year-old who wheezed a little as he rolled along. He was dressed in a voluminous white *kurta*, the fashion this season though he was fourth generation Punjabi. His grooming amounted to an uncontrollable beard and oily hair that smelled of too much Dapper Deepak pomade. Even before he *namaste*d I knew it was his first *shaadi*. I could see his eyeballs move as he read my résumé, seeming to hover before him. I did not need to read his to know he was a dataraja, for he talked about nothing but himself and the brilliant things he was doing; the spec of some new protein processor array, the 'ware he was breeding, the aeais he was nurturing in his stables, his trips to Europe and the United States where everyone knew his name and great people were glad to welcome him.

"Of course, Awadh's never going to ratify the Hamilton Acts—no matter how close Shrivastava Minister is to President McAuley—but if it did, if we allow ourselves that tiny counterfactual—well, it's the end of the economy: Awadh *is* IT, there are more graduates in Mehrauli than there are in the whole of California. The Americans may go on about the mockery of a human soul, but they *need* our Level 2.8s—you know what that is? An aeai can pass as human 99 percent of the time—because everybody know no one does quantum crypto like us, so I'm not worrying about having to close up the data-haven, and even if they do, well, there's always Bharat—I cannot see the Ranas bowing down to Washington, not when 25 percent of their forex comes out of licensing deals from *Town and Country* . . . and that's hundred percent aeai generated. . . ."

He was a big affable clown of a man with wealth that would have bought my Palace in Durbar Square and every priest in it and I found myself praying to Taleju to save me from marrying such a bore. He stopped in mid-stride, so abruptly I almost tripped.

"You must keep walking," I hissed. "That is the rule."

"Wow," he said, standing stupid, eyes round in surprise. Couples piled up behind us. In my peripheral vision I could see Mamaji making urgent, threatening gestures. Get him *on*. "Oh wow. You're an ex-Kumari."

"Please, you are drawing attention to yourself." I would have tugged his arm, but that would have been an even more deadly error.

"What was it like, being a goddess?"

"I am just a woman now, like any other," I said. Ashok gave a soft harrumph, as if he had achieved a very small enlightenment, and walked on, hands clasped behind his back. He may have spoken to me once, twice before we reached the end of the Silk Wall and parted: I did not hear him, I did not hear the music, I did not even hear the eternal thunder of Delhi's traffic. The only sound in my head was the high-pitched sound between my eyes of needing to cry but knowing I could not. Fat, selfish, gabbling, Ashok had sent me back to the night I ceased to be a goddess.

Bare soles slapping the polished wood of the Kumari Ghar's corridors. Running feet, muted shouts growing ever more distant as I knelt, still unclothed for my Kumarima's inspection, looking at the blood drip from my smashed fingertip onto the painted wood floor. I remember no pain; rather, I looked at the pain from a separate place, as if the girl who felt it were another person. Far far away, Smiling Kumarima stood, held in

time, hands to mouth in horror and guilt. The voices faded and the bells of Durbar Square began to swing and toll, calling to their brothers across the city of Kathmandu until the valley rang from Bhaktapur to Trisuli Bazaar for the fall of the Kumari *Devi*.

In the space of a single night, I became human again. I was taken to the Hanumandhoka—walking this time like anyone else on the paving stones—where the priests said a final *puja*. I handed back my red robes and jewels and boxes of make-up, all neatly folded and piled. Tall Kumarima had got me human clothes. I think she had been keeping them for some time. The King did not come to say goodbye to me. I was no longer his sister. But his surgeons had put my finger back together well, though they warned that it would always feel a little numb and inflexible.

I left at dawn, while the street cleaners were washing down the stones of Durbar Square beneath the apricot sky, in a smooth-running Royal Mercedes with darkened windows. My Kumarimas made their farewells at the palace gate. Tall Kumarima hugged me briefly to her.

"Oh, there was so much more I needed to do. Well, it will have to suffice."

I felt her quivering against me, like a bird too tightly gripped in a hand. Smiling Kumarima could not look at me. I did not want her to.

As the car took me across the waking city I tried to understand how it felt to be human. I had been a goddess so long I could hardly remember feeling any other way, but it seemed so little different that I began to suspect that you are divine because people say you are. The road climbed through green suburbs, winding now, growing narrower, busy with brightly decorated buses and trucks. The houses grew leaner and meaner, to roadside hovels and *chai*-stalls and then we were out of the city—the first time since I had arrived seven years before. I pressed my hands and face to the glass and looked down on Kathmandu beneath its shroud of ochre smog. The car joined the long line of traffic along the narrow, rough road that clung to the valley side. Above me, mountains dotted with goatherd shelters and stone shrines flying tattered prayer banners. Below me, rushing cream-brown water. Nearly there. I wondered how far behind me on this road were those other government cars, carrying the priests sent to seek out little girls bearing the thirty-two signs of perfection. Then the car rounded the bend in the valley and I was home, Shakya, its truck halts and gas station, the shops and the temple of Padma Narteswara, the dusty trees with white rings painted around their trunks and between them the stone wall and arch where the steps led down through the terraces to my house, and in that stone-framed rectangle of sky, my parents, standing there side by side, pressing closely, shyly, against each other as I had last seen them lingering in the courtyard of the Kumari Ghar.

Mamaji was too respectable to show anything like outright anger, but she had ways of expressing her displeasure. The smallest crust of *roti* at dinner, the meanest scoop of *dhal*. New girls coming, make room make room—me to the highest, stuffiest room, furthest from the cool of the courtyard pool.

"He asked for my palmer address," I said.

"If I had a rupee for every palmer address," Mamaji said. "He was only interested in you as a novelty, dearie. Anthropology. He was never going to make a proposition. No, you can forget right about him."

But my banishment to the tower was a small punishment for it lifted me above the noise and fumes of the old city. If portions were cut, small loss: the food had been dreadful every day of the almost two years I had been at the *haveli*. Through the wooden lattice, beyond the water tanks and satellite dishes and kids playing rooftop cricket, I could see the ramparts of the Red Fort, the minarets and domes of the Jami Masjid and beyond them, the glittering glass and titanium spires of New Delhi. And higher than any of them, the flocks of pigeons from the *kabooter* lofts, clay pipes bound to their legs so they fluted and sang as they swirled over Chandni Chowk. And Mamaji's worldly wisdom made her a fool this time, for Ashok was surreptitiously messaging me, sometimes questions about when I was divine, mostly about himself and his great plans and ideas. His lilac-colored words, floating in my inner-vision against the intricate silhouettes of my *jali* screens, were bright pleasures in those high summer days. I discovered the delight of political argument; against Ashok's breezy optimism, I set my readings of the news channels. From the opinion columns it seemed inevitable to me that Awadh, in exchange for Favored Nation status from the United States of America, would ratify the Hamilton Acts and outlaw all aeais more intelligent than a langur monkey. I told none of our intercourse to Mamaji. She would have forbidden it, unless he made a proposal.

On an evening of pre-monsoon heat, when the boys were too tired even for cricket and the sky was an upturned brass bowl, Mamaji came to my turret on the top of the old merchant's *haveli*. Against propriety, the *jali*s were thrown open, my gauze curtains stirred in the swirls of heat rising from the alleys below.

"Still you are eating my bread." She prodded my *thali* with her foot. It was too hot for food, too hot for anything other than lying and waiting for the rain and the cool, if it came at all this year. I could hear the voices of the girls down in the courtyard as they kicked their legs in the pool. This day I would have loved to be sitting along the tiled edge with them but I was piercingly aware that I had lived in the *haveli* of the Lovely Girl *Shaadi* Agency longer than any of them. I did not want to be their Kumarima. And when the whispers along the cool marble corridors made them aware of my childhood, they would ask for small *pujas*, little miracles to help them find the right man. I no longer granted them, not because I feared that I had no power any more—that I never had—but that it went out from me and into them and that was why they got the bankers and television executives and Mercedes salesmen.

"I should have left you in that Nepalese sewer. Goddess! Hah! And me fooled into thinking you were a prize asset. Men! They may have share options and Chowpatty Beach apartments but deep down, they're as superstitious as any back-country *yadav*."

"I'm sorry, Mamaji," I said, turning my eyes away.

"Can you help it? You were only born perfect in thirty-two different ways. Now you listen, *cho chweet*. A man came to call on me."

Men always came calling, glancing up at the giggles and rustles of the Lovely Girls peeping through the *jalis* as he waited in the cool of the courtyard for Shweta to present him to Mamaji. Men with offers of marriage, men with prenuptial contracts, men with dowry down-payments. Men asking for special, private viewings. This man who had called on Mamaji had come for one of these.

"Fine young man, lovely young man, just twenty. Father's big in water. He has requested a private rendezvous, with you."

I was instantly suspicious, but I had learned among the Lovely Girls of Delhi, even more than among the priests and Kumarimas of Kathmandu, to let nothing show on my painted face.

"Me? Such an honor . . . and him only twenty . . . and a good family too, so well connected."

"He is a Brahmin."

"I know I am only a Shakya. . . ."

"You don't understand. He is a *Brahmin*."

There was so much more I needed to do, Tall Kumarima had said as the royal car drove away from the carved wooden gates of the Kumari Ghar. One whisper through the window would have told me everything: *the curse of the Kumari*.

Shakya hid from me. People crossed the street to find things to look at and do. Old family friends nodded nervously before remembering important business they had to be about. The *chai-dhabas* gave me free tea so I would feel uncomfortable and leave. Truckers were my friends, bus-drivers and long-haulers pulled in at the biodiesel stations. They must have wondered who was this strange twelve-year-old girl, hanging around truck-halts. I do not doubt some of them thought more. Village by village, town by town the legend spread up and down the north road. Ex-Kumari.

Then the accidents started. A boy lost half his hand in the fan belt of a Nissan engine. A teenager drank bad *rakshi* and died of alcohol poisoning. A man slipped between two passing trucks and was crushed. The talk in the *chai-dhabas* and the repair shops was once again of my uncle who fell to his death while the little goddess-to-be bounced in her wire cradle laughing and laughing and laughing.

I stopped going out. As winter took hold over the head-country of the Kathmandu valley, whole weeks passed when I did not leave my room. Days slipped away watching sleet slash past my window, the prayer banners bent almost horizontal in the wind, the wire of the cableway bouncing. Beneath it, the furious, flooding river. In that season the voices of the demons spoke loud from the mountain, telling me the most hateful things about faithless Kumaris who betray the sacred heritage of their *devi*.

On the shortest day of the year the bride buyer came through Shakya. I heard a voice I did not recognize talking over the television that burbled away day and night in the main room. I opened the door just enough to admit a voice and gleam of firelight.

"I wouldn't take the money off you. You're wasting your time here in Nepal. Everyone knows the story, and even if they pretend they don't believe, they don't act that way."

I heard my father's voice but could not make out his words. The bride buyer said,

"What might work is down south, Bharat or Awadh. They're so desperate in Delhi they'll even take Untouchables. They're a queer lot, those Indians; some of them might even like the idea of marrying a goddess, like a status thing. But I can't take her, she's too young, they'll send her straight back at the border. They've got rules. In India, would you believe? Call me when she turns fourteen."

Two days after my fourteenth birthday, the bride buyer returned to Shakya and I left with him in his Japanese SUV. I did not like his company or trust his hands, so I slept or feigned sleep while he drove down into the lowlands of the Terai. When I woke I was well over the border into my childhood land of wonder. I had thought the bride-buyer would take me to ancient, holy Varanasi, the new capital of the Bharat's dazzling Rana dynasty, but the Awadhis, it seemed, were less in awe of Hindu superstitions. So we came to the vast, incoherent roaring sprawl of the two Delhis, like twin hemispheres of a brain, and to the Lovely Girl *Shaadi* Agency. Where the marriageable men were not so twenty-forties sophisticated, at least in the matter of ex-*devis*. Where the only ones above the curse of the Kumari were those held in even greater superstitious awe: the genetically engineered children known as Brahmins.

Wisdom was theirs, health was theirs, beauty and success and status assured and a wealth that could never be devalued or wasted or gambled away, for it was worked into every twist of their DNA. The Brahmin children of India's super-elite enjoyed long life—twice that of their parents—but at a price. They were indeed the twice-born, a caste above any other, so high as to be new Untouchables. A fitting partner for a former goddess: a new god.

Gas flares from the heavy industries of Tughluq lit the western horizon. From the top of the high tower I could read New Delhi's hidden geometries, the necklaces of light around Connaught Place, the grand glowing net of the dead Raj's monumental capital, the incoherent glow of the old city to the north. The penthouse at the top of the sweeping wing-curve of Narayan Tower was glass; glass walls, glass roof, beneath me, polished obsidian that reflected the night sky. I walked with stars at my head and feet. It was a room designed to awe and intimidate. It was nothing to one who had witnessed demons strike the heads from goats, who had walked on bloody silk to her own palace. It was nothing to one dressed, as the messenger had required, in the full panoply of the goddess. Red robe, red nails, red lips, red eye of Siva painted above my own black kohled eyes, fake-gold headdress hung with costume pearls, my fingers dripped gaudy rings from the cheap jewelry sellers of Kinari Bazaar, a light chain of real gold ran from my nose stud to my ear-ring; I was once again Kumari *Devi*. My demons rustled inside me.

Mamaji had drilled me as we scooted from old city to new. She had swathed me in a light voile *chador*, to protect my make-up she said; in

truth, to conceal me from the eyes of the street. The girls had called blessings and prayers after me as the *phatphat* scuttled out of the *haveli*'s courtyard.

"You will say nothing. If he speaks to you, you duck your head like a good Hindu girl. If anything has to be said, I will say it. You may have been a goddess but he is a Brahmin. He could buy your pissy palace a dozen times over. Above all, do not let your eyes betray you. The eyes say nothing. They taught you that at least in that Kathmandu, didn't they? Now come on *cho chweet*, let's make a match."

The glass penthouse was lit only by city-glow and concealed lamps that gave off an uncomfortable blue light. Ved Prakash Narayan sat on a *musnud*, a slab of unadorned black marble. Its simplicity spoke of wealth and power beneath any ornate jewelry. My bare feet whispered on the star-filled glass. Blue light welled up as I approached the dais. Ved Prakash Narayan was dressed in a beautifully worked long *sherwani* coat and traditional tight *churidar* pajamas. He leaned forward into the light and it took every word of control Tall Kumarima had ever whispered to me to hold the gasp.

A ten-year-old boy sat on the throne of the Mughal Emperor.

Live twice as long, but age half as fast. The best deal Kolkata's genetic engineers could strike with four million years of human DNA. A child husband for a once-child goddess. Except this was no child. In legal standing, experience, education, taste, and emotions, this was a twenty-year-old man, every way except the physical.

His feet did not touch the floor.

"Quite, quite extraordinary." His voice was a boy's. He slipped from his throne, walked around me, studying me as if I were an artifact in a museum. He was a head shorter than me. "Yes, this is indeed special. What is the settlement?"

Mamaji's voice from the door named a number. I obeyed my training and tried not to catch his eye as he stalked around me.

"Acceptable. My man will deliver the prenuptial before the end of the week. A goddess. My goddess."

Then I caught his eyes and I saw where all his missing years were. They were blue, alien blue, and colder than any of the lights of his tower-top palace.

These Brahmins are worse than any of us when it comes to social climbing, Ashok messaged me in my aerie atop the *shaadi haveli*, prison turned bridal boudoir. *Castes within castes within castes.* His words hung in the air over the hazy ramparts of the red fort before dissolving into the dashings of the musical pigeons. *Your children will be blessed.*

Until then I had not thought about the duties of a wife with a ten-year-old boy.

On a day of staggering heat I was wed to Ved Prakash Narayan in a climate-control bubble on the manicured green before Emperor Humayun's tomb. As on the night I was introduced, I was dressed as Kumari. My husband, veiled in gold, arrived perched on top of a white horse followed by a band and a dozen elephants with colored patterns worked on their

trunks. Security robots patrolled the grounds as astrologers proclaimed favorable auspices and an old-type brahmin in his red cord blessed our union. Rose petals fluttered around me, the proud father and mother distributed gems from Hyderabad to their guests, my *shaadi* sisters wept with joy and loss, Mamaji sniffed back a tear and vile old Shweta went round hoarding the free and over-flowing food from the buffet. As we were applauded and played down the receiving line, I noticed all the other somber-faced ten-year-old boys with their beautiful, tall foreign wives. I reminded myself who was the child bride here. But none of them were goddesses.

I remember little of the grand *durbar* that followed except face after face after face, mouth after mouth after mouth opening, making noise, swallowing glass after glass after glass of French champagne. I did not drink for I do not have the taste for alcohol, though my young husband in his raja finery took it, and smoked big cigars too. As we got into the car—the *honeymoon* was another Western tradition we were adopting—I asked if anyone had remembered to inform my parents.

We flew to Mumbai on the company tilt-jet. I had never before flown in an aircraft. I pressed my hands, still hennaed with the patterns of my *mehndi*, on either side of the window as if to hold in every fleeting glimpse of Delhi falling away beneath me. It was every divine vision I had ever had looking down from my bed in the Kumari Ghar on to India. This was indeed the true vehicle of a goddess. But the demons whispered as we turned in the air over the towers of New Delhi, *you will be old and withered when he is still in his prime.*

When the limousine from the airport turned on to Marine Drive and I saw the Arabian Sea glinting in the city-light, I asked my husband to stop the car so I could look and wonder. I felt tears start in my eyes and thought, *the same water in it is in you.* But the demons would not let me be: *you are married to something that is not human.*

My *honeymoon* was wonder upon wonder: our penthouse apartment with the glass walls that opened on sunset over Chowpatty Beach. The new splendid outfits we wore as we drove along the boulevards, where stars and movie-gods smiled down and blessed us in the virtual sight of our palmers. Color, motion, noise, chatter; people and people and people. Behind it all, the wash and hush and smell of the alien sea.

Chambermaids prepared me for the wedding night. They worked with baths and balms, oils and massages, extending the now-fading henna tracery on my hands up my arms, over my small upright breasts, down the *manipuraka chakra* over my navel. They wove gold ornaments into my hair, slipped bracelets on my arms and rings on my fingers and toes, dusted and powdered my dark Nepali skin. They purified me with incense smoke and flower petals, they shrouded me in veils and silks as fine as rumors. They lengthened my lashes and kohled my eyes and shaped my nails to fine, painted points.

"What do I do? I've never even touched a man," I asked, but they *namasted* and slipped away without answer. But the older—the Tall Kumarima, as I thought of her—left a small soapstone box on my bridal divan. Inside were two white pills.

They were good. I should have expected no less. One moment I was standing nervous and fearful on the Turkestan carpet with a soft night air that smelled of the sea stirring the translucent curtains, the next visions of the Kama Sutra, beamed into my brain through my golden earhook, swirled up around me like the pigeons over Chandni Chowk. I looked at the patterns my *shaadi* sisters had painted on the palms of my hands and they danced and coiled from my skin. The smells and perfumes of my body were alive, suffocating. It was as if my skin had been peeled back and every nerve exposed. Even the touch of the barely moving night air was intolerable. Every car horn on Marine Drive was like molten silver dropped into my ear.

I was terribly afraid.

Then the double doors to the robing room opened and my husband entered. He was dressed as a Mughal grandee in a jeweled turban and a long-sleeved pleated red robe bowed out at the front in the manly act.

"My goddess," he said. Then he parted his robe and I saw what stood so proud.

The harness was of crimson leather intricately inlaid with fine mirrorwork. It fastened around the waist and also over the shoulders, for extra security. The buckles were gold. I recall the details of the harness so clearly because I could not take more than one look at the thing it carried. Black. Massive as a horse's, but delicately upcurved. Ridged and studded. This all I remember before the room unfolded around me like the scented petals of a lotus and my senses blended as one and I was running through the apartments of the Taj Marine Hotel.

How had I ever imagined it could be different for a creature with the appetites and desires of an adult but the physical form of a ten-year-old boy?

Servants and dressers stared at me as I screamed incoherently, grabbing at wraps, shawls, anything to cover my shame. At some tremendous remove I remember my husband's voice calling *Goddess! My Goddess!* over and over.

"Schizophrenia is a terribly grating word," Ashok said. He twirled the stem of a red thornless rose between his fingers. "Old-school. It's dissociative disorder these days. Except there are no disorders, just adaptive behaviors. It was what you needed to cope with being a goddess. Dissociating. Disjuncting. Becoming you and *other* to stay sane."

Night in the gardens of the Dataraja Ashok. Water trickled in the stone canals of the *charbagh*. I could smell it, sweet and wet. A pressure curtain held the smog at bay; trees screened out Delhi's traffic. I could even see a few stars. We sat in an open *chhatri* pavilion, the marble still warm from the day. Set on silver *thalis* were medjool dates, *halva*—crisp with flies—folded *paan*. A security robot stepped into the lights from the Colonial bungalow, passed into shadow. But for it I might have been in the age of the rajas.

Time broken apart, whirring like *kabooter* wings. Dissociative behavior. Mechanisms for coping. Running along the palm-lined boulevards of Mumbai, shawls clutched around my wifely finery that made me feel

more naked than bare skin. I ran without heed or direction. Taxis hooted, *phatphats* veered as I dashed across crowded streets. Even if I had had money for a *phatphat*—what need had the wife of a Brahmin for crude cash?—I did not know where to direct it. Yet that other, demonic self must have known, for I found myself on the vast marble concourse of a railway station, a sole mite of stillness among the tens of thousands of hastening travelers and beggars and vendors and staff. My shawls and throws clutched around me, I looked up at the dome of red Raj stone and it was a second skull, full of the awful realization of what I had done.

A runaway bride without even a *paisa* to her name, alone in Mumbai Chhatrapati Shivaji Terminus. A hundred trains leaving that minute for any destination but nowhere to go. People stared at me, half Nautch-courtesan, half Untouchable street-sleeper. In my shame, I remembered the hook behind my ear. *Ashok*, I wrote across the sandstone pillars and swirling ads. *Help me!*

"I don't want to be split, I don't want to be me and *other*, why can't I just be one?" I beat the heels of my hands off my forehead in frustration. "Make me well, make me right!" Shards of memory. The white-uniformed staff serving me hot *chai* in the first-class private compartment of the *shatabdi* express. The robots waiting at the platform with the antique covered palanquin, to bear me through the Delhi dawn traffic to the green watered geometries of Ashok's gardens. But behind them all was one enduring image, my uncle's white fist slipping on the bouncing cable and him falling, legs pedalling air, to the creamy waters of Shakya river. Even then, I had been split. Fear and shock. Laughter and smiles. How else could anyone survive being a goddess?

Goddess. My Goddess.

Ashok could not understand. "Would you cure a singer of his talent? There is no madness, only ways of adapting. Intelligence is evolution. Some would argue that I display symptoms of mild Asperger's syndrome."

"I don't know what that means."

He twirled the rose so hard the stem snapped.

"Have you thought about what you're going to do?"

I had thought of little else. The Narayans would not give up their

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dowry lightly. Mamaji would sweep me from her door. My village was closed to me.

"Maybe for a while, if you could . . ."

"It's not a good time. . . . Who's going to have the ear of the Lok Sabha? A family building a dam that's going to guarantee their water supply for the next fifty years, or a software entrepreneur with a stable of Level 2.75 aeais that the United States government thinks are the sperm of Shaitan? Family values still count in Awadh. You should know."

I heard my voice say, like a very small girl, "Where can I go?"

The bride-buyer's stories of Kumaris whom no one would marry and could not go home again ended in the woman-cages of Varanasi and Kolkata. Chinese paid rupees by the roll for an ex-Goddess.

Ashok moistened his lips with his tongue.

"I have someone in Bharat, in Varanasi. Awadh and Bharat are seldom on speaking terms."

"Oh thank you, thank you . . ." I went down on my knees before Ashok, clutched his hands between my palms. He looked away. Despite the artificial cool of the *charbagh*, he was sweating freely.

"It's not a gift. It's . . . employment. A job."

"A job, that's good, I can do that; I'm a good worker, work away at anything I will; what is it? Doesn't matter, I can do it. . . ."

"There are commodities need transported."

"What kind of commodities? Oh it doesn't mater, I can carry anything."

"Aeais." He rolled a *paan* from the silver dish. "I'm not going to wait around for Shrivastava's Krishna Cops to land in my garden with their excommunication ware."

"The Hamilton Acts," I ventured, though I did not know what they were, what most of Ashok's mumbles and rants meant.

"Word is, everything above level 2.5." Ashok chewed his lower lip. His eyes widened as the *paan* curled through his skull.

"Of course, I will do anything I can to help."

"I haven't told you how I need you to transport them. Absolutely safe, secure, where no Krishna Cop can ever find them." He touched his right forefinger to his Third Eye. "Self, and *other*."

I went to Kerala and had processors put into my skull. Two men did it on a converted bulk gas carrier moored outside territorial waters. They shaved my long lovely black hair, unhinged my skull and sent robots smaller than the tiniest spider spinning computers through my brain. Their position out beyond the Keralese fast patrol boats enabled them to carry out much secret surgery, mostly for the Western military. They gave me a bungalow and an Australian girl to watch over me while my sutures fused and hormone washes speed-grew my hair back.

Protein chips; only show on the highest resolution scans but no one'll look twice at you; no one'll look twice at another shaadi *girl down hunting for a husband.*

So I sat and stared at the sea for six weeks and thought about what it would be like to drown in the middle of it, alone and lost a thousand kilometers from the nearest hand that might seize yours. A thousand kilo-

meters north in Delhi a man in an Indian suit shook hands with a man in an American suit and announced the Special Relationship that would make Ashok an outlaw.

You know what Krishna Cops are? They hunt aeais. They hunt the people who stable them, and the people who carry them. They don't care. They're not picky. But they won't catch you. They'll never catch you.

I listened to demons in the swash and run of the big sea on the shore. Demons I now knew were facets of my other self. But I was not afraid of them. In Hinduism, demons are merely the mirrors of the gods. As with men, so with gods; it is the winners who write the history. The universe would look no different had Ravana and his Rakshasas won their cosmic wars.

No one but you can carry them. No one but you has the neurological architecture. No one but you could endure another mind in there.

The Australian girl left small gifts outside my door: plastic bangles, jelly-shoes, rings, and hairslides. She stole them from the shops in town. I think they were her way of saying that she wanted to know me, but was afraid of what I had been, of what the things in my head would make me become. The last thing she stole was a beautiful sheer silk *dupatta* to cover my ragged hair when she took me to the airport. From beneath it I looked at the girls in business saris talking into their hands in the departure lounge and listened to the woman pilot announce the weather in Awadh. Then I looked out of the *phatphat* at the girls darting confidently through the Delhi traffic on their scooters and wondered why my life could not be like theirs.

"It's grown back well." Ashok knelt before me on my cushions in the *chhatri*. It was his sacred place, his temple. He raised his palmer-gloved hand and touched his forefinger to the *tilak* over my third eye. I could smell his breath. Onions, garlic, rancid *ghee*. "You may feel a little disoriented. . . ."

I gasped. Senses blurred, fused, melted. I saw heard felt smelled tasted everything as one undifferentiated sensation, as gods and babies sense, wholly and purely. Sounds were colored, light had texture, smells spoke and chimed. Then I saw myself surge up from my cushions and fall toward the hard white marble. I heard myself cry out. Ashok lunged toward me. Two Ashoks lunged toward me. But it was neither of those. I saw one Ashok, with two visions, inside my head. I could not make shape or sense out of my two seeings, I could not tell which was real, which was mine, which was *me*. Universes away I heard a voice say *help me*. I saw Ashok's houseboys lift me and take me to bed. The painted ceiling, patterned with vines and shoots and flowers, billowed above me like monsoon storm clouds, then blossomed into darkness.

In the heat of the night I woke stark, staring, every sense glowing. I knew the position and velocity of each insect in my airy room that smelled of biodiesel, dust, and patchouli. I was not alone. There was an *other* under the dome of my skull. Not an awareness, a consciousness; a sense of *separateness*, a manifestation of myself. An avatar. A demon.

"Who are you?" I whispered. My voice sounded loud and full of bells, like Durbar Square. It did not answer—it could not answer, it was not a

sentience—but it took me out into the *charbagh* water garden. The stars, smudged by pollution, were a dome over me. The crescent moon lay on its back. I looked up and fell into it. *Chandra. Mangal. Budh. Guru. Shukra. Shani. Rahu. Ketu.* The planets were not points of light, balls of stone and gas; they had names, characters, loves, hatreds. The twenty-seven *Nakshatars* spun around my head. I saw their shapes and natures, the patterns of connections that bound the stars into relationships and stories and dramas as human and complex as *Town and Country*. I saw the wheel of the *rashis*, the Great Houses, arc across the sky, and the whole turning, engines within engines, endless wheels of influence and subtle communication, from the edge of the universe to the center of the earth I stood upon. Planets, stars, constellations; the story of every human life unfolded itself above me and I could read them all. Every word.

All night I played among the stars.

In the morning, over bed-tea, I asked Ashok, "What is it?"

"A rudimentary Level 2.6. A *janampatri* aeai, does astrology, runs the permutations. It thinks it lives out there, like some kind of space monkey. It's not very smart, really. Knows about horoscopes and that's it. Now get that down you and grab your stuff. You've a train to catch."

My reserved seat was in the women's *bogie* of the high-speed *shatabdi* express. Husbands booked their wives on to it to protect them from the attentions of the male passengers who assumed every female was single and available. The few career women chose it for the same reason. My fellow passenger across the table from me was a Muslim woman in a formal business *shalwar*. She regarded me with disdain as we raced across the Ganga plain at three hundred and fifty kilometers per hour. *Little simpering wife-thing.*

You would not be so quick to judge if you knew what we really were, I thought. *We can look into your life and tell you everything that has, is and will ever happen to you, mapped out in the* chakras *of the stars.* In that night among the constellations my demon and I had flowed into each other until there was no place where we could say aeai ended and I began.

I had thought holy Varanasi would sing to me like Kathmandu, a spiritual home, a city of nine million gods and one goddess, riding through the streets in a *phatphat*. What I saw was another Indian capital of another Indian state; glass towers and diamond domes and industry parks for the big world to notice, slums and *bastis* at their feet like sewage pigs. Streets began in this millennium and ended in one three before it. Traffic and hoardings and people people people but the diesel smoke leaking in around the edges of my smog mask carried a ghost of incense.

Ashok's Varanasi agent met me in the Jantar Mantar, the great solar observatory of Jai Singh; sundials and star spheres and shadow discs like modern sculpture. She was little older than me; dressed in a cling-silk top and jeans that hung so low from her hips I could see the valley of her buttocks. I disliked her at once but she touched her palmer-glove to my forehead in the shadows around Jai Singh's astrological instruments and I felt the stars go out of me. The sky died. I had been holy again and now I was just meat. Ashok's *girli* pressed a roll of rupees into my hand. I barely looked at it. I barely heard her instructions to get something to eat, get

a *kafi*, get some decent clothes. I was bereft. I found myself trudging up the steep stone steps of the great Samrat not knowing where I was who I was what I was doing halfway up a massive sundial. Half a me. Then my third eye opened and I saw the river wide and blue before me. I saw the white sands of the eastern shore and the shelters and dung fires of the *sadhus*. I saw the *ghats*, the stone river steps, curving away on either side further than the reach of my eyes. And I saw people. People washing and praying cleaning their clothes and offering *puja* and buying and selling and living and dying. People in boats and people kneeling, people waist deep in the river, people scooping up silver handfuls of water to pour over their heads. People casting handfuls of marigold flowers onto the stream, people lighting little mango-leaf *diya* lamps and setting them afloat, people bringing their dead to dip them in the sacred water. I saw the pyres of the burning *ghat*, I smelled sandalwood, charring flesh, I heard the skull burst, releasing the soul. I had heard that sound before at the Royal burning *ghats* of Pashupatinath, when the King's Mother died. A soft crack, and free. It was a comforting sound. It made me think of home.

In that season I came many times to the city by the Ganga. Each time I was a different person. Accountants, counselors, machine-soldiers, *soapi* actors, database controllers: I was the goddess of a thousand skills. The day after I saw Awadhi Krishna Cops patrolling the platforms at Delhi station with their security robots and guns that could kill both humans and aeais, Ashok began to mix up my modes of transport. I flew, I trained, I chugged overnight on overcrowded country buses, I waited in chauffeured Mercedes in long lines of brightly decorated trucks at the Awadh-Bharat border. The trucks, like the crack of an exploding skull, reminded me of my kingdom. But at the end was always the rat-faced *girli* lifting her hand to my *tilak* and taking me apart again. In that season I was a

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fabric weaver, a tax consultant, a wedding planner, a *soapi* editor, an air traffic controller. She took all of them away.

And then the trip came when the Krishna Cops were waiting at the Bharat end as well. By now I knew the politics of it as well as Ashok. The Bharatis would never sign the Hamilton Acts—their multi-billion-rupee entertainment industry depended on aeais—but neither did they want to antagonize America. So, a compromise: all aeais over Level 2.8 banned, everything else licensed and Krishna Cops patrolling the airports and railway stations. Like trying to hold back the Ganga with your fingers.

I had spotted the courier on the flight. He was two rows in front of me; young, wisp of a beard, Star-Asia youth fashion, all baggy and big. Nervous nervous nervous, all the time checking his breast pocket, checking checking checking. A small time *badmash*, a wannabe dataraja with a couple of specialist 2.85s loaded onto a palmer. I could not imagine how he had made it through Delhi airport security.

It was inevitable that the Varanasi Krishna Cops would spot him. They closed on him as we lined up at passport control. He broke. He ran. Women and children fled as he ran across the huge marble arrivals hall, trying to get to the light, the huge glass wall and the doors and the mad traffic beyond. His fists pounded at air. I heard the Krishna Cops' staccato cries. I saw them unholster their weapons. Shrieks went up. I kept my head down, shuffled forward. The immigration officer checked my papers. Another *shaadi* bride on the hunt. I hurried through, turned away toward the taxi ranks. Behind me I heard the arrivals hall fall so shockingly silent it seemed to ring like a temple bell.

I was afraid then. When I returned to Delhi it was as if my fear had flown before me. The city of djinns was the city of rumors. The government had signed the Hamilton Act. Krishna Cops were sweeping house to house. Palmer files were to be monitored. Children's aeai toys were illegal. US marines were being airlifted in. Prime Minister Shrivastava was about to announce the replacement of the rupee with the dollar. A monsoon of fear and speculation and in the middle of it all was Ashok.

"One final run, then I'm out. Can you do this for me? One final run?"

The bungalow was already half-emptied. The furniture was all packed, only his processor cores remained. They were draped in dustsheets, ghosts of the creatures that had lived there. The Krishna Cops were welcome to them.

"We both go to Bharat?"

"No, that would be too dangerous. You go ahead, I'll follow when it's safe." He hesitated. Tonight, even the traffic beyond the high walls sounded different. "I need you to take more than the usual."

"How many?"

"Five."

He saw me shy back as he raised his hand to my forehead.

"Is it safe?"

"Five, and that's it done. For good."

"Is it safe?"

"It's a series of overlays, they'll share core code in common."

It was a long time since I had turned my vision inward to the jewels Ashok had strung through my skull. Circuitry. A brain within a brain.

"Is it safe?"

I saw Ashok swallow, then bob his head: a Westerner's *yes*. I closed my eyes. Seconds later I felt the warm, dry touch of his finger to my inner eye.

We came to with the brass light of early morning shining through the *jali*. We were aware we were deeply dehydrated. We were aware that we were in need of slow-release carbohydrate. Our serotonin inhibitor levels were low. The window arch through which the sun beamed was a Mughal true arch. The protein circuits in my head were DPMA one-eight-seven-nine slash omegas, under licence from BioScan of Bangalore.

Everything we looked at gave off a rainbow of interpretations. I saw the world with the strange manias of my new guests: medic, nutritionist, architectural renderer, biochip designer, engineering aeai controlling a host of repair-shop robots. Nasatya. Vaishvanara. Maya. Brihaspati. Tvastri. My intimate demons. This was not *other*. This was *legion*. I was a many-headed *devi*.

All that morning, all afternoon, I fought to make sense of a world that was five worlds, five impressions. *I* fought. Fought to make us *me*. Ashok fretted, tugging at his woolly beard, pacing, trying to watch television, check his mails. At any instant Krishna Cop combat robots could come dropping over his walls. Integration would come. It had to come. I could not survive the clamor in my skull, a monsoon of interpretations. Sirens raced in the streets, far, near, far again. Every one of them fired off a different reaction from my selves.

I found Ashok sitting amongst his shrouded processors, knees pulled up to his chest, arms draped over them. He looked like a big, fat, soft boy, his Mama's favorite.

Noradrenaline pallor, mild hypoglycaemia, fatigue toxins, said Nasatya.

Yin Systems bevabyte quantum storage arrays, said Brihaspati simultaneously.

I touched him on the shoulder. He jerked awake. It was full dark outside, stifling: the monsoon was already sweeping up through the United States of Bengal.

"We're ready," I said. "*I'm* ready."

Dark-scented hibiscus spilled over the porch where the Mercedes waited.

"I'll see you in a week," he said. "In Varanasi."

"In Varanasi."

He took my shoulders in his hands and kissed me lightly, on the cheek. I drew my *dupatta* over my head. Veiled, I was taken to the United Provinces Night Sleeper Service. As I lay in the first class compartment the aeais chattered away inside my head, surprised to discover each other, reflections of reflections.

The *chowkidar* brought me bed-tea on a silver tray in the morning. Dawn came up over Varanasi's sprawling slums and industrial parks. My personalized news-service aeai told me that Lok Sabha would vote on ratifying the Hamilton Accords at ten AM. At twelve, Prime Minister Shri-

vastava and the United States Ambassador would announce a Most Favored Nation trade package with Awadh.

The train emptied onto the platform beneath the spun-diamond canopy I knew so well. Every second passenger, it seemed, was a smuggler. If I could spot them so easily, so could the Krishna Cops. They lined the exit ramps, more than I had ever seen before. There were uniforms behind them and robots behind the uniforms. The porter carried my bag on his head; I used it to navigate the press of people pouring off the night train. *Walk straight, as your Mamaji taught you. Walk tall and proud, like you are walking the Silken Way with a rich man.* I drew my *dupatta* over my head, for modesty. Then I saw the crowd piling up at the ramp. The Krishna Cops were scanning every passenger with palmers.

I could see the *badmashs* and smuggler-boys hanging back, moving to the rear of the mill of bodies. But there was no escape there either. Armed police backed by riot-control robots took up position at the end of the platform. Shuffle by shuffle, the press of people pushed me toward the Krishna Cops, waving their right hands like blessings over the passengers. Those things could peel back my scalp and peer into my skull. My red case bobbed ahead, guiding me to my cage.

Brihaspati showed me what they would do to the circuits in my head.

Help me! I prayed to my gods. And Maya, architect of the demons, answered me. Its memories were my memories and it remembered rendering an architectural simulation of this station long before robot construction spiders started to spin their nano-diamond web. Two visions of Varanasi station, superimposed. With one difference that might save my life. Maya's showed me the inside of things. The inside of the platform. The drain beneath the hatch between the rear of the *chai*-booth and the roof support.

I pushed through the men to the small dead space at the rear. I hesitated before I knelt beside the hatch. One surge of the crowd, one trip, one fall, and I would be crushed. The hatch was jammed shut with dirt. Nails broke, nails tore as I scrabbled it loose and heaved it up. The smell that came up from the dark square was so foul I almost vomited. I forced myself in, dropped a meter into shin-deep sludge. The rectangle of light showed me my situation. I was mired in excrement. The tunnel forced me to crawl but the end of it was promise, the end of it was a semi-circle of daylight. I buried my hands in the soft sewage. This time I did retch up my bed tea. I crept forward, trying not to choke. It was vile beyond anything I had ever experienced. But not so vile as having your skull opened and knives slice away slivers of your brain. I crawled on my hands and knees under the tracks of Varanasi Station, to the light, to the light, to the light, and out through the open conduit into the cess lagoon where pigs and rag-pickers rooted in the shoals of drying human manure.

I washed as clean as I could in the shriveled canal. *Dhobi*-wallahs beat laundry against stone slabs. I tried to ignore Nasatya's warnings about the hideous infections I might have picked up.

I was to meet Ashok's girl on the street of *gajras*. Children sat in doorways and open shop fronts threading marigolds onto needles. The work was too cheap even for robots. Blossoms spilled from bushels and plastic

cases. My *phatphat*'s tires slipped on wet rose petals. We drove beneath a canopy of *gajra* garlands that hung from poles above the shop-fronts. Everywhere was the smell of dead, rotting flowers. The *phatphat* turned into a smaller, darker alley and into the back of a mob. The driver pressed his hand to the horn. The people reluctantly gave him way. The alcofuel engine whined. We crept forward. Open space, then a police *jawan* stepped forward to bar our way. He wore full combat armor. Brihaspati read the glints of data flickering across his visor: deployments, communications, an arrest warrant. I covered my head and lower face as the driver talked to him. What's going on? Some *badmash*. Some dataraja.

Down the street of *gajras*, uniformed police led by a plainclothes Krishna Cop burst open a door. Their guns were drawn. In the same breath, the shutters of the *jharoka* immediately above crashed up. A figure jumped up onto the wooden rail. Behind me, the crowd let out a vast roaring sigh. *There he is there the badmash oh look look it's a girl!*

From the folds of my *dupatta* I saw Ashok's *girli* teeter there an instant, then jump up and grab a washing line. It snapped and swung her ungently down through racks of marigold garlands into the street. She crouched a moment, saw the police, saw the crowd, saw me, then turned and ran. The *jawan* started toward her, but there was another quicker, deadlier. A woman screamed as the robot bounded from the rooftop into the alley. Chrome legs pistoned, its insect head bobbed, locked on. Marigold petals flew up around the fleeing girl but everyone knew she could not escape the killing thing. One step, two step, it was behind her. I saw her glance over her shoulder as the robot unsheathed its blade.

I knew what would happen next. I had seen it before, in the petal-strewn streets of Kathmandu, as I rode my litter among my gods and Kumarimas.

The blade flashed. A great cry from the crowd. The girl's head bounded down the alley. A great jet of blood. Sacrificial blood. The headless body took one step, two.

I slipped from the *phatphat* and stole away through the transfixed crowd.

I saw the completion of the story on a news channel at a *chai-dhaba* by the tank on Scindia *ghat*. The tourists, the faithful, the vendors and funeral parties were my camouflage. I sipped *chai* from a plastic cup and watched the small screen above the bar. The sound was low but I could understand well enough from the pictures. Delhi police break up a notorious aeai smuggling ring. In a gesture of Bharati-Awadhi friendship, Varanasi Krishna cops make a series of arrests. The camera cut away before the robot struck. The final shot was of Ashok, pushed down into a Delhi police car in plastic handcuffs.

I went to sit on the lowest *ghat*. The river would still me, the river would guide me. It was of the same substance as me, divinity. Brown water swirled at my be-ringed toes. That water could wash away all earthly sin. On the far side of the holy river, tall chimneys poured yellow smoke into the sky. A tiny round-faced girl came up to me, offered me marigold *gajras* to buy. I waved her away. I saw again this river, these *ghats*, these temples and boats as I had when I lay in my wooden room in my palace in

Durbar Square. I saw now the lie Tall Kumarima's palmer had fed me. I had thought India a jeweled skirt, laid out for me to wear. It was a bride-buyer with an envelope of rupees, it was walking the Silken Way until feet cracked and bled. It was a husband with the body of a child and the appetites of a man warped by his impotence. It was a savior who had always only wanted me for my sickness. It was a young girl's head rolling in a gutter.

Inside this still-girl's head, my demons were silent. They could see as well as I that that there would never be a home for us in Bharat, Awadh, Maratha, any nation of India.

North of Nayarangadh the road rose through wooded ridges, climbing steadily up to Mugling where it turned and clung to the side of the Trisuli's steep valley. It was my third bus in as many days. I had a routine now. Sit at the back, wrap my *dupatta* round me, look out the window. Keep my hand on my money. Say nothing.

I picked up the first bus outside Jaunpur. After emptying Ashok's account, I thought it best to leave Varanasi as inconspicuously as possible. I did not need Brihaspati to show me the hunter aeais howling after me. Of course they would have the air, rail, and bus stations covered. I rode out of the Holy City on an unlicensed taxi. The driver seemed pleased with the size of the tip. The second bus took me from Gorakhpur through the *dhal* fields and banana plantations to Nautanwa on the border. I had deliberately chosen small, out-of-the-way Nautanwa, but still I bowed my head and shuffled my feet as I came up to the Sikh emigration officer behind his tin counter. I held my breath. He waved me through without even a glance at my identity card.

I walked up the gentle slope and across the border. Had I been blind, I would have known at once when I crossed into my kingdom. The great roar that had followed me as close as my own skin fell silent so abruptly it seemed to echo. The traffic did not blare its way through all obstacles. It steered, it sought ways around pedestrians and sacred cows lolling in the middle of the road, chewing. People were polite in the bureau where I changed my Bharati rupees for Nepalese; did not press and push and try to sell me things I did not want in the shop where I bought a bag of greasy *samosas*; smiled shyly to me in the cheap hotel where I hired a room for the night. Did not demand demand demand.

I slept so deeply that it felt like a fall through endless white sheets that smelled of sky. In the morning the third bus came to take me up to Kathmandu.

The road was one vast train of trucks, winding in and out of the bluffs, looping back on itself, all the while climbing, climbing. The gears on the old bus whined. The engine strove. I loved that sound, of engines fighting gravity. It was the sound of my earliest recollection, before the child-assessors came up a road just like this to Shakya. Trains of trucks and buses in the night. I looked out at the roadside *dhabas*, the shrines of piled rocks, the tattered prayer banners bent in the wind, the cableways crossing the chocolate-creamy river far below, skinny kids kicking swaying cages across the high wires. So familiar, so alien to the demons that shared my skull.

The baby must have been crying for some time before the noise rose above the background hubbub of the bus. The mother was two rows ahead of me, she shushed and swung and soothed the tiny girl but the cries were becoming screams.

It was Nasatya made me get out of my seat and go to her.

"Give her to me," I said and there must have been some tone of command from the medical aeai in my voice for she passed me the baby without a thought. I pulled back the sheet in which she was wrapped. The little girl's belly was painfully bloated, her limbs floppy and waxen.

"She's started getting colic when she eats," the mother said but before she could stop me I pulled away her diaper. The stench was abominable; the excrement bulky and pale.

"What are you feeding her?"

The woman held up a *roti* bread, chewed at the edges to soften it for baby. I pushed my fingers into the baby's mouth to force it open though Vaishvanara the nutritionist already knew what we would find. The tongue was blotched red, pimpled with tiny ulcers.

"Has this only started since you began giving her solid food?" I asked. The mother waggled her head in agreement. "This child has ceoliac disease," I pronounced. The woman put her hands to her face in horror, began to rock and wail. "Your child will be fine, you must just stop feeding her bread, anything made from any grain except rice. She cannot process the proteins in wheat and barley. Feed her rice, rice and vegetables and she will brighten up right away."

The entire bus was staring as I went back to my seat. The woman and her baby got off at Naubise. The child was still wailing, weak now from its rage, but the woman raised a *namaste* to me. A blessing. I had come to Nepal with no destination, no plan or hope, just a need to be back. But already an idea was forming

Beyond Naubise the road climbed steadily, switching back and forth over the buttresses of the mountains that embraced Kathmandu. Evening was coming on. Looking back I could see the river of headlights snaking across the mountainside. Where the bus ground around another hairpin bend, I could see the same snake climb up ahead of me in red taillights. The bus labored up a long steep climb. I could hear, everyone could hear, the noise in the engine that should not have been there. Up we crawled to the high saddle where the watershed divided, right to the valley of Kathmandu, left to Pokhara and the High Himalaya. Slower, slower. We could all smell the burning insulation, hear the rattling.

It was not me who rushed to the driver and his mate. It was the demon Trivasti.

"Stop stop at once!" I cried. "Your alternator has seized! You will burn us up."

The driver pulled into the narrow draw, up against the raw rock. On the offside, trucks passed with millimeters to spare. We got the hood up. We could see the smoke wafting from the alternator. The men shook their heads and pulled out palmers. The passengers piled to the front of the bus to stare and talk.

"No no no, give me a wrench," I ordered.

The driver stared but I shook my outstretched hand, demanding. Perhaps he remembered the crying baby. Perhaps he was thinking about how long it would take a repair truck to come up from Kathmandu. Perhaps he was thinking about how good it would be to be home with his wife and children. He slapped the monkey wrench into my hand. In less than a minute I had the belt off and the alternator disconnected.

"Your bearings have seized," I said. "It's a persistent fault on pre-2030 models. A hundred meters more and you would have burned her out. You can drive her on the battery. There's enough in it to get you down to Kathmandu."

They stared at this little girl in an Indian sari, head covered but sleeves of her *choli* rolled up and fingers greasy with biolube.

The demon returned to his place and it was clear as the darkening sky what I would do now. The driver and his mate called out to me as I walked up beside the line of vehicles to the head of the pass. We ignored them. Passing drivers sounded their multiple, musical horns, offered lifts. I walked on. I could see the top now. It was not far to the place where the three roads divided. Back to India, down to the city, up to the mountains.

There was a *chai-dhaba* at the wide, oil-stained place where vehicles turned. It was bright with neon signs for American drinks and Bharati mineral water, like something fallen from the stars. A generator chugged. A television burbled familiar, soft Nepali news. The air smelled of hot *ghee* and biodiesel.

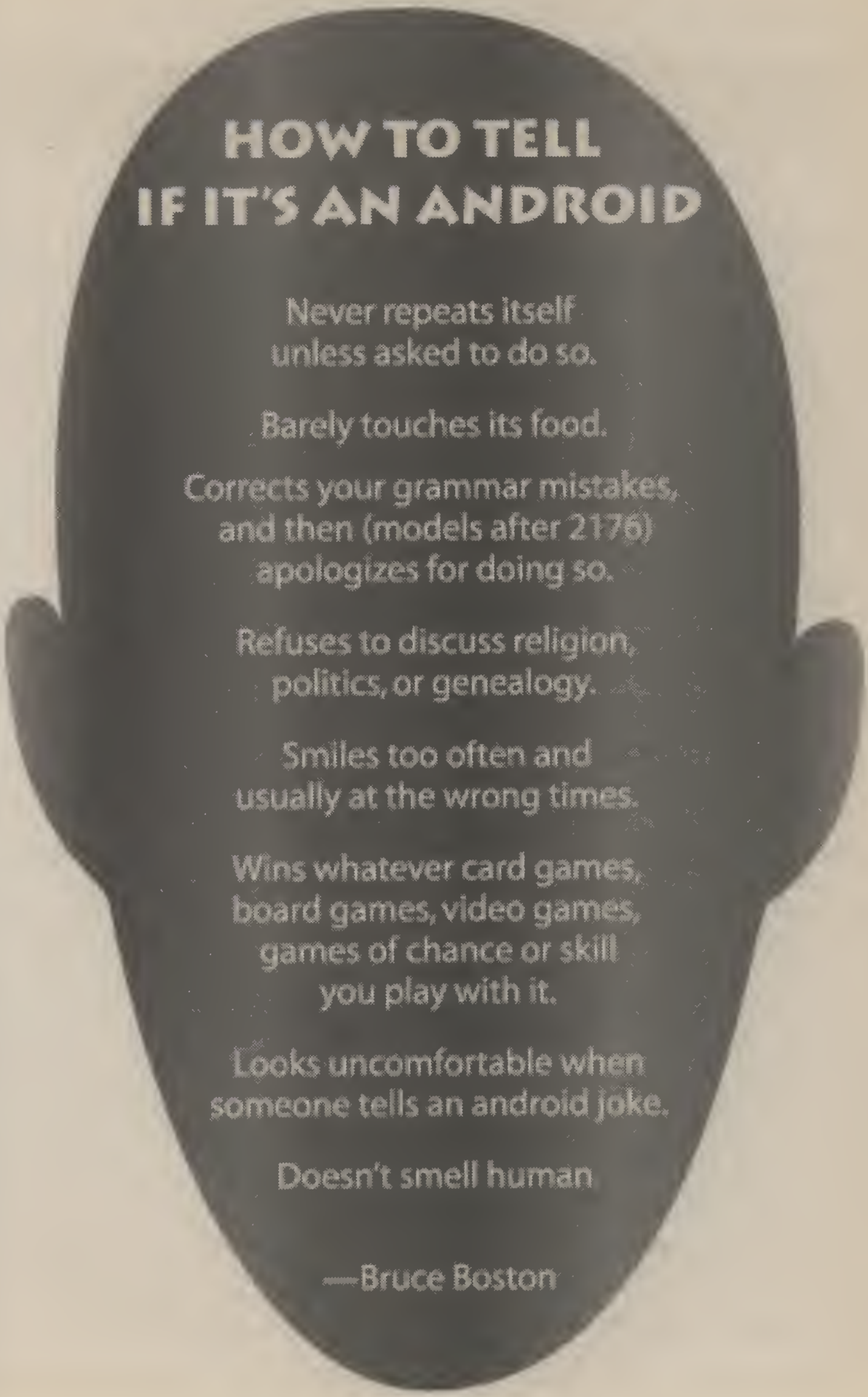
The owner did not know what to make of me, strange little girl in my Indian finery. Finally he said, "Fine night."

It was. Above the smogs and soots of the valley, the air was magically clear. I could see for a lifetime in any direction. To the west the sky held a little last light. The great peaks of Manaslu and Anapurna glowed mauve against the blue.

"It is," I said, "oh it is."

Traffic pushed slowly past, never ceasing on this high crossroads of the world. I stood in the neon flicker of the *dhaba*, looking long at the mountains and I thought, *I shall live there*. We shall live in a wooden house close to trees with running water cold from high snow. We shall have a fire and a television for company and prayer banners flying in the wind and in time people will stop being afraid and will come up the path to our door. There are many ways to be divine. There is the big divine, of ritual and magnificence and blood and terror. Ours shall be a little divinity, of small miracles and everyday wonders. Machines mended, programs woven, people healed, homes designed, minds and bodies fed. I shall be a little goddess. In time, the story of me will spread and people will come from all over; Nepalis and foreigners, travelers and hikers and monks. Maybe one day a man who is not afraid. That would be good. But if he does not come, that will be good also, for I shall never be alone, not with a houseful of demons.

Then I found I was running, with the surprised *chai-wallah* calling, "Hey! Hey! Hey!" after me, running down the side of the slow-moving line of traffic, banging on the doors, "Hi! Hi! Pokhara! Pokhara!" slipping and sliding over the rough gravel, toward the far, bright mountains. ❍


HOW TO TELL
IF IT'S AN ANDROID
Never repeats itself
unless asked to do so.
Barely touches its food.
Corrects your grammar mistakes,
and then (models after 2176)
apologizes for doing so.
Refuses to discuss religion,
politics, or genealogy.
Smiles too often and
usually at the wrong times.
Wins whatever card games,
board games, video games,
games of chance or skill
you play with it.
Looks uncomfortable when
someone tells an android joke.
Doesn't smell human
—Bruce Boston

ABSOLUTION GAP
by Alastair Reynolds
Ace, $24.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-441-01158-6

Absolution Gap brings Reynolds's complex space opera series to a conclusion.

The earlier books (*Revelation Space, Redemption Ark*, and *Chasm City*) have set up a future in which the human race has developed starflight and colonized several nearby star systems. Advances in genetic engineering have led to a number of divergent cultures, including Ultras, who carry bodily augmentation to extremes. At the same time, some nonhuman species (notably pigs) have been genetically modified and their intelligence increased. A few extraterrestrial intelligences have been discovered, most of them extinct except for the enigmatic Pattern Jugglers, an aquatic race on the planet Ararat.

In *Revelation Space,* an overwhelming threat to all these groups entered the arena with the discovery of the Inhibitors—a machine race that is the effective equivalent of Fred Saberhagen's Berserkers. The Inhibitors, as we learn, have a single goal, bringing destruction to all space-going civilizations. In *Redemption Ark,* the human race makes contact with the Inhibitors, who proceed to destroy an entire inhabited system. Barring some major turn of events, the outcome seems inevitable.

Absolution Gap follows events on two worlds a considerable distance from one another. On Ararat, a group of refugees from the initial battles with the Inhibitors waits on the home world of the Pattern Jugglers. The Jugglers merge with and eventually take over humans who swim in the planet's oceans. Scorpio, a genetically altered pig who was once a gang boss in Chasm City, is de facto leader in the absence of Chastain, the disillusioned human who led the refugees to this world after the events of *Redemption Ark*. Most believe that it is only a matter of time before Inhibitors arrive here.

Light years away, on the icy moon Hela, a mad prophet named Quaiche has created a religion based on the strange periodic disappearances of the gas giant that is Hela's primary. Rashmika Els, a young girl from an outlying village, searching for her lost brother, leaves home and joins a caravan, one of the slow-moving trains that has grown up around the religion's central act of faith, the desire to keep the primary constantly in sight so that no disappearance will be missed. To this end, Quaiche and his followers have build huge cathedrals that travel around the slowly rotating moon, striving to maintain a position directly below the primary. Inevitably, Rashmika finds her way into the presence of the prophet Quaiche, where she slowly becomes aware that far more is going on than anyone suspects.

Reynolds brings together these two plot strands, beginning with the arrival of Inhibitors at Ararat, closely followed by the death of Chastain and the birth of a strange child, Aura, who is somehow linked to

powerful vanished races. Even as an infant, she reveals her talent by giving her human guardians superweapons to deploy against the Inhibitors. She also urges the refugees to travel to Hela, where she senses the presence of a strange race that may be able to help them oppose the Inhibitors. Scorpio, the genetically altered pig, relentlessly drives the expedition, striking up an alliance with the ship's captain, a victim of the dreaded Melding Plague that has made him literally one with his ship. Eventually the humans push Scorpio out of power, but his instincts remain accurate; when they do finally arrive at their destination, Scorpio turns out to be the only force capable of throwing a much-needed monkey-wrench into the humans' plans.

On Hela, with its huge cathedrals slowly circumnavigating their frozen airless world, Reynolds has created one of the most compelling images in recent SF. The slow buildup to the final conflict, and the almost lapidary insertion of hints and little bits of backstory, gives the series depth to match its sweeping plot. The book ends with an epilogue that jumps into the even farther future, suggesting that perhaps Reynolds is, for the time being, done with this particular slice of future history. Yet there are enough intriguing plot strands from earlier in the history that he could certainly do more if he wanted to. I, for one, hope he does—but either way, it will be extremely interesting to see what he turns his hand to next.

THE GREEN AND THE GRAY
by Timothy Zahn
Tor, $27.95 (hc)
ISBN: O-765-30717-0

Timothy Zahn is one of the more interesting writers to have come into SF in the 1980s, a versatile storyteller who's turned out to be far more durable than some of his trendier contemporaries. Even his early work (e.g., the "Cobra" trilogy) tested the boundaries of the "military SF" subgenre. A good sample of how far he's come is his latest. It might be called "hard urban fantasy," set in post-9/11 New York City and environs.

The story begins as Roger and Caroline Whittier, a young married couple walking home from a play at Columbia, meet a man with a gun. They are forced at gunpoint into an alley, where he shows them an unconscious teenage girl. He orders them to take her home with them for the night. Without any choice, they comply, then call the police. But when the police arrive, the girl seems to have disappeared—although there is no place she could have gone to from their upper-story apartment which has no fire escape.

Puzzled, the next morning they try to figure out what has happened; Roger even goes so far as to retrace their steps from the previous night. Then, to their surprise, the girl appears on their balcony—which the police had thoroughly searched—and asks to come inside. She gives her name as Melantha Green, but resists their attempts to learn more about her, or about the events of the previous night, although she does say that the man who led them to her was trying to help.

Now the Whittiers are thoroughly spooked. Some hunting leads them to a group of what seem to be Melantha's relatives—although the address seems to have an inordinate number of people named "Green" living there. The Greens seem to be of vaguely Mediterranean origin, but they deftly avoid giving useful answers to the Whittiers' questions.

Meanwhile, the Whittiers learn

that their apartment is under surveillance by someone who can apparently scale sheer concrete buildings without being detected. They learn that Melantha is the focus of intense rivalry between the Greens and the Grays, who correspond closely to the Elves and Dwarves, the one group at home with forests and growing things, the other rock-dwellers and metal smiths.

Both groups tell of an ancient war that caused them to leave their homeland, which at first appears to be in the vicinity of some distant star, and migrate to New York in the early twentieth century. The well-concealed ship the Greens arrived in is still used as a meeting place and storehouse. For a long time the two groups coexisted without coming into contact. But now they have met each other, and the ancient war is about to break out again, with drastic consequences not only for the participants but for the human bystanders.

The police begin to take an interest in the events. In the post-9/11 world, vague threats of city-wide destruction take on a credibility that can't be dismissed. By turns, the police become allies and opponents to the Whittiers, then to various factions among the Greens and Grays. Zahn's awareness of the changed atmosphere for law enforcement gives the book an edge it would have been hard to imagine a few years ago.

Zahn does a good job of setting this plot against a realistic post-9/11 New York, making especially good use of a New York detective who decides to follow up the original visit to the Whittiers' apartment and ends up on the front lines of the Greens' battle plans. The focus on how the events affect ordinary people caught up in them makes this one of Zahn's most interesting books to date.

THE WHITE ROSE
by R. Garcia y Robertson
Tor, $25.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-312-86994-0

Garcia's latest (third in a series) follows the adventures of a trendy Hollywood agent magically transported to the era of the Wars of the Roses. The tone runs the gamut from real tragedy to tongue-in-cheek, though it's more often in the latter mode.

As the book opens, we find Robyn Stafford moping about twenty-first century England, wishing she could return to 1461, where she is known as Lady Robyn of Pontefract, fiancée of Edward, Prince of Wales. Unfortunately, she hasn't yet learned to travel through time at will, although she hopes her magical powers will eventually permit it. However, she manages to goad one of her rivals into banishing her and her Hollywood secretary, Heidi, back to 1461 together. They find themselves in the west of Wales, where they are immediately captured by Owen Tudor, one of Edward's enemies.

Here Heidi's Hollywood skills come into play, as she protects her boss from Owen's advances by submitting to them herself. Soon, with the aid of her little bag of potent reefer, Heidi has the old Tudor under control. This is the cue for Robyn to escape to England, and after several more narrow escapes, she succeeds in finding Edward—just in time to be captured by another group of his enemies, the Woodvilles. Edward is offered the choice between marrying one of their daughters and being handed over to the Tudors—who are now invading England with a large army.

The plot continues with a series of escapes and reversals, some of which will be familiar historical material to

Wars of the Roses buffs. As Robyn comes to realize, medieval politics is just as dirty as the modern Hollywood brand, but the consequences of losing are considerably nastier. The most serious complication arises when Robyn realizes that she is pregnant by Edward—at the same time as the Woodvilles are making a serious move, aided by their own potent magic, to replace her as the queen-to-be. In defense, she begins to develop her own magical powers—but will they be enough?

Garcia y Robertson smoothly mixes historical fantasy, time-travel romance, and a healthy dose of satire to create a cross-genre entertainment. This one's a lot of fun, but one warning: the book ends on a cliffhanger. Readers who hate waiting to find out how the story ends might want to start off by getting the first two books in the series—*Knight Errant* and *Lady Robyn*—which should be enough to keep them entertained until the fourth in the series becomes available.

LOST AND FOUND
by Alan Dean Foster
Del Rey, $23.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-345-46125-8

Foster takes the time-honored trope of a lone human captured by aliens, and discovers several new angles. Not surprisingly to anyone who knows Foster's previous work, one of the best-realized characters here is a talking dog named George. But while Foster doesn't overlook the opportunities for comedy that such a character naturally presents, he's largely playing it straight here.

Marcus Walker is a young commodities trader from Chicago, spending a week camping beside a lake in the high Sierras to win a bet from his city friends who doubt that he can handle life without modern conveniences. But his wilderness stay is rudely interrupted when he wakes up one morning to find himself, along with a hunk of the territory immediately around his tent, aboard a huge alien spaceship. He soon meets George, a dog from Earth whose powers of speech have been released by the aliens. George tells him the lay of the land and introduces him to their fellow captives—there turn out to be a good number of them, representatives of various intelligent races. The captives are destined to be sold in the flourishing (if not exactly legal) exotic pet trade in some far corner of the galaxy.

As Walker meets his fellow captives, he quickly finds himself involved in the politics of their situation. He finds out the hard way that one of the aliens is a snitch, who informs their captors—the Vilenjji—whenever one of the captives does something forbidden. (The Vilenjji's list of forbidden activities is long and arbitrary.) Another captive, the powerfully built Braouk, is considered too dangerous to approach—until Walker and George manage to make an ally of him. They also enlist Sque, an arrogant squid-like being of undeniably high intelligence. Together, the four perfect their plan to escape their prison.

As often in Foster's work, the ensemble cast of seemingly incompatible creatures cooperating to overcome their mutual enemies works to give the reader a variety of characters to identify with. But while the good guys manage to pull off a victory in the short run, they soon run into complications that, at least temporarily, stall Walker's quest to return home. The up side is that Walker and George find themselves living comfortably in an advanced galactic

society; the down side is that nobody seems to know exactly where Earth is . . .

A well-paced and smoothly told entertainment that showcases Foster's best qualities. Exactly the right kind of book to give someone who's just starting to find out that SF includes more than just movies and TV.

DAVY
by Edgar Pangborn
Old Earth, $30.00 (hc)
ISBN: 1-882968-30-1

Here's one of the masterpieces of what was once a dominant subgenre of SF: the post-nuclear society. (*A Canticle for Leibowitz* and Wyndham's *Rebirth* are other memorable examples of the trope.) At the same time, it's a coming-of-age story and a rollicking satire. Reissued in a handsome hardcover package (touted as the fortieth-anniversary edition), this is part of Old Earth's program to return Pangborn's work to print. (The book was originally published by St. Martin's Press in 1964.)

Briefly, the novel is the story of a young boy born into bond servitude in a quasi-puritanical society run by a repressive church. Restless and curious beyond his limited station in life, Davy escapes his captivity and goes wandering across the face of the world. He meets several characters who serve as mentors, one of whom eventually becomes acknowledged as a father figure—perhaps literally Davy's father, but for that we have only the character's say-so. For several years, he is part of a group of traveling players. We also get a glimpse of him after the main action of the story, part of an expedition that has gone in search of other lands, exiles after losing a battle to the church.

Pangborn tells the story from his protagonist's point of view, and the tone varies wildly as the mature Davy looks back at different points of his life. At a number of points, any style-sensitive reader will be inevitably reminded of Huckleberry Finn; at others, a more restrained narrative voice presents the bald realities of a world that has somehow survived a nuclear war, and managed to rebuild itself to a pre-industrial stage.

Davy's knowledge of his world is confined largely to the remnants of the northeastern US, primarily upstate New York and those parts of New England that have survived a worldwide rise in sea levels. Pangborn gets some fun out of playing with distorted versions of various place names, and even more fun out of Davy's half-educated misspellings of big words. Footnotes by Davy's companions in exile add to the feeling of multiple layers that characterizes the book's structure.

Some of the book's initial impact undoubtedly came from its breaking the taboos of early sixties genre fiction; the sex scenes would bother few readers nowadays, though their very presence in a "boy's book" was a shock at the time. The prominent anti-religious theme also seems tame to someone who's been through the subsequent decades, though perhaps there are more readers nowadays whom it would offend than there were ten years after its publication. Of course, arriving as it did just as the New Wave was gathering momentum, *Davy* picked up a considerable following from young readers looking for something a bit edgier than what they'd been finding in the bookstores to date.

Davy holds up very well to rereading, better than many books of simi-

lar vintage by much bigger names in the field. If you missed it first time around, here's a perfect chance to remedy the omission.

ORIGINS: Fourteen Billion Years of Cosmic Evolution
by Neil De Grasse Tyson and Donald Goldsmith
Norton, $27.95 (hc)
ISBN: 0-393-05992-8

This is the book version of a PBS "Nova" special that looks at the origins of life, the universe, and everything. Tyson, the regular astronomy columnist for *Natural History* magazine, is also director of the Hayden Planetarium. Goldsmith's credentials are as a popular science writer, with a strong background in astronomy.

The authors begin with the earliest point of time scientists believe they can say anything definite about: milliseconds after the Big Bang. Most of the essential features of our universe can be traced to that unique moment, although science is at a loss to explain such fundamental facts as the predominance of matter over antimatter, or the prevalence of the undetectable dark matter and dark energy that seem to make up most of the universe.

After cooling from its primordial state, the debris began to resemble the universe as we know it. Gravity, light, and matter became predominant as galaxies and stars took shape. Tyson and Goldsmith give clear explanations of the physical processes involved. The stars, originally composed almost entirely of hydrogen and helium, gradually cooked up the other elements of the periodic table and spread them about the galaxies in supernova explosions. From these stellar ashes were formed planets and the other solid bodies that gather in the vicinity of stars.

The authors give updates on the discovery of extrasolar planets (over a hundred are now known, and the total grows almost daily). They take a critical look at candidates for favorable environments for life in our own solar system. Based on current knowledge, Mars, Europa, and Titan may be the best candidates. The book ends with a look at the latest thinking on the origins of life, a question made much more interesting by the discovery of extremophiles—creatures that live comfortably in environments formerly considered hostile to life, such as under the arctic ice or in acid pools near volcanic vents.

This exploration of the main currents of cosmology, astrophysics, and exobiology may be the most accessible popular treatment of the subject. Be warned, though—almost all the scientific frontiers covered in the book are rapidly changing, and at best this will only bring you up to within a couple of years of current knowledge. It's a great era for science watchers, and this book will do a lot to help you understand the game. ❍

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SF Conventional Calendar

The busiest convention time of the year, Memorial Day weekend, is coming up. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, info on fanzines and clubs, and how to get a later, longer list of cons, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con 6 months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard.—Erwin S. Strauss

APRIL 2005

21–24—**AggieCon.** For info, write: **Cepheid Variable (958460), Box 5688, College Station TX 77844.** Or phone: **(979) 268-3068** (10 AM to 10 PM, not collect). **(Web) aggiecon.tamu.edu. (E-mail) lurkz@shadowswolf.com.** Con will be held in: College Station TX (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Student Center. Guests will include: none announced.

22–24—**PenguiCon. info@penguicon.org.** Sheraton, Novi MI. Science fiction and open-source software.

22–24—**ConFlux. (+61-2) 6241-3211. info@conflux.org.au.** Rydges Lakeside Hotel, London Circuit, Canberra ACT.

28–May 1—**Nebula Awards, c/o Box 310, Huntingdon Valley PA 19006. (973) 242-5999.** Allegro Hotel, Chicago IL.

29–May 1—**StarFest, Box 24955, Denver CO 80224. (303) 757-5850. starland.com.** Marriott Tech Ctr. Star Trek.

29–May 1—**Malice Domestic, 703 Kenbrook Dr., Silver Spring MD 20902. (703) 751-4444.** Marriott, Arlington VA.

29–May 1—**Highlander Down Under, Box 5310, Manuka ACT 2603, Australia. buzz@hidu.org.** Novotel, Sydney.

29–May 2—**CostumeCon, 289 W. Hidden Hollow Dr., Orem UT 84058. (801) 225-5374.** Ogden UT. Costumers' con.

30—**GenreCon, Sarnia Library, 124 Christina St. S., Sarnia ON N7T 8E1. (519) 337-3291. lambtonlibrary.org.**

MAY 2005

6–8—**United Fan Con, 26 Darrell Dr., Randolph MA 02368. (781) 986-8735. unitedfancon.com.** Quincy MA. Trek.

6–8—**LepreCon, Box 26665, Tempe AZ 85285. (480) 945-6890. leprecon.org.** Carefree AZ. D. Dorman, K.J. Anderson.

6–8—**To Be CONtinued, Box 1582, N. Riverside IL 60546. info@tobecontinued.com.** Radisson, Rosemont IL. Martin.

13–15—**Dreamworker England, Box 3250, Glastonbury BA6 9WL, UK.** Ramada Plaza, Bristol UK.

14–21—**Creation Cruise, 217 S. Kenwood, Glendale CA 91205. (818) 409-0960. creationent.com.** Miami/Caribbean.

21–28—**Analog & Asimov's SF Cruise. sciencefictioncruise.com.** Carnival Glory, to the Caribbean. Dozois, Schmidt.

27–29—**MarCon, Box 141414, Columbus OH 43214. marcon.org.** Hyatt. L. Niven, S. Jackson, M. Resnick, Tom Smith.

27–29—**ConQuest, Box 36212, Kansas City MO 64171. kcsciencefiction.org.** Airport Hilton. Joe Haldeman, G. Martin.

27–29—**Oasis, Box 592905, Orlando FL 32859. (407) 263-5822. oasfis.org.** Radisson. Jane Lindskold, S. MacDonald.

27–29—**Animazement, Box 1383, Cary NC 27512. animazement.org.** Sheraton, Durham NC. Anime.

27–30—**BaltiCon, Box 686, Baltimore MD 21203. (410) 563-2737. balticon.org.** Wyndham. S. Barnes, Due, Eggleton.

27–30—**MediaWest*Con, 200 E. Thomas, Lansing MI 48906. mediawestcon.org. mdiawstcon@aol.com.** Holiday Inn S.

27–30—**WisCon, Box 1624, Madison WI 53701. sf3.org/wiscon.** Concourse Hotel. Gwyneth Jones, Robin McKinley.

AUGUST 2005

4–8—**Interaction, Box 58009, Louisville KY 40268. www.interaction.worldcon.org.uk.** Glasgow Scotland. $195/£110.

SEPTEMBER 2005

1–5—**CascadiaCon, Box 1066, Seattle WA 98111. www.seattle2005.org.** NASFiC, while WorldCon's in Glasgow. $95.

AUGUST 2006

23–27—**LACon IV, Box 8442, Van Nuys CA 91409. info@laconiv.com.** Anaheim CA. Connie Willis. WorldCon. $150.

AUGUST 2007

30–Sep. 3—**Nippon 2007, Box 314, Annapolis Jct. MD 20701. nippon2007.org.** Yokohama Japan. WorldCon. $160.

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NEXT ISSUE

JULY ISSUE

Nebula-, Hugo-, and World-Fantasy-Award-winner **Michael Swanwick** treats us to another sly and playful far-future adventure of those dashing rogues and con-artists Darger and Surplus—the heroes of the Hugo-winning "The Dog Said Bow-Wow" and "The Little Cat Laughed To See Such Sport"—in our lead story for July, "Girls and Boys, Come Out to Play." In this one, the posthuman scalawags are up to no good, as usual, in a remote and pastoral country, when they stumble across the sinister secret that is concealed among the peaceful little villages and romance-haunted hills, and learn that while many have longed to meet the gods, actually *meeting* them can be quite a different experience altogether, and one that can hardly be called divine. This is a funny, swashbuckling, highly entertaining romp, so don't miss it!

ALSO IN JULY

Popular British "hard science" writer **Stephen Baxter** introduces us to "The Children of Time" in a dazzlingly imaginative story that *starts* after what most of us would consider The End of the World and goes on from there to paint a vivid portrait of the next several hundred million years of human history; **Richard Mueller** returns after a long absence to tell the suspenseful story of "Clipper's Last Ride" on an untamed frontier planet; new writer **Edd Vick** shows us the plight of travelers lost in a very strange place who really need to use "The Compass"—no matter what the cost of using it might be; new writer **Peter Friend** whisks us along through space with two oddly mismatched businessmen in search of "The Real Deal," in spite of the obstacles and dangers they'll have to surmount to find it; Nebula- and Hugo-winner **Kristine Kathryn Rusch** informs us that "Killing Time" can be a dangerous thing to do, no matter how attractive it might seem; new writer **Daniel Grotta**, making his *Asimov's* debut, sets out with a camera to snap a few shots, with surprising and potentially sinister results, in "Raw"; and new writer **Samantha Ling**, making *her* Asimov's debut, tells an odd and poignant new kind of fairy tale, in "Waking Chang-Er."

EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column takes us on a tour of "Two Worldcons, Worlds Apart"; our "Thought Experiments" feature takes us for a stroll around the "Science Fiction Village" with Nebula-winner **Walter Jon Williams**; in his "On the Net" column, **James Patrick Kelly** exclaims "Bring on the Digital Hugos!"; and **Paul Di Filippo** brings us "On Books"; plus an array of cartoons, poems, and other features. Look for our July issue on sale at your newsstand on May 17, 2005. Or subscribe today and be sure to miss none of the fantastic stuff we have coming up for you this year (you can also subscribe to *Asimov's* online, in varying formats, including in downloadable form for your PDA, by going to our website, *www.asimovs.com*).

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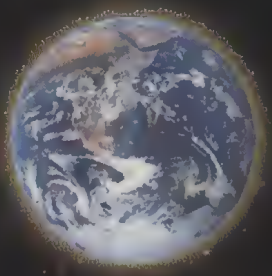
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